

INFINITY

BEGINS IN HANCOCK COUNTY



COURTESY INFINITY SCIENCE CENTER

Infinity Science Center exhibits will engage students and visitors of all ages in mission to discover the wonders of the earth, space, oceans and hurricanes.

By MARY PEREZ

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STENNIS SPACE CENTER—

Apollo 13 astronaut Fred Haise likened the ground-breaking for Infinity Science Center in Hancock County on Thursday to launch day: “We’ve been counting down to this event for several years and now we are finally here.”

Haise and other Infinity directors are still \$4 million short of having the money to complete the building, but decided to go ahead with the infrastructure work while fundraising continues.

He’s visited museums around the world, but Haise said none is quite like the experience that will await visitors at Infinity Science Center.

“This truly will be an adventure,” he said, with children and adults working through missions as they learn about the oceans, space and Earth and enter their data into computers. “They can even set parameters and create their own hurricane,” he said.

Infinity will highlight the work being done at the neighboring Stennis Space Center and be a natural science museum and a major tourist attraction drawing up to 400,000 visitors each year. The experience was created by ESI Design, whose senior designer, Ed Schlossberg, has an international repu-

ration for design and for being the husband of Caroline Kennedy, said John McFarland, an Infinity board member and emcee of the ground-breaking ceremony.

“I love this project,” Schlossberg said in a video message. The displays will immerse visitors in the work being done by the Stennis scientists and engineers.

“Stennis to me is like this astonishing jewel that in a way doesn’t have a front door to invite the public in,” Schlossberg said. “We want Infinity to be that front door.”

Planned to be located off Exit 2 of I-10 next to the Welcome Center, Infinity is expected to be open in the fall 2010 with exhibits, interactive galleries, theaters, a gift shop and cafeteria.

John Wilson, education program development director for Infinity, said America has the daunting challenge ahead of going to Mars. “We must inspire the next generation to take up those challenges,” he said. “We must also build science literacy in the general public,” and show generations of people this work is important.

The road to Infinity will be built by the Mississippi Department of Transportation, and Southern District Chief Wayne Brown said the Department of Marine Resources

has purchased 1,200 acres adjacent to the science center and may create wetland and swamp tours there to complement Infinity.

Hancock Bank President George Schloegel said it is fitting the Infinity ground-breaking came the week of the death of Leo Seal Jr., the chairman of Hancock Bank and the Infinity board, who worked for nearly 10 years to get Infinity built. Shortly before Seal died Monday, he told Schloegel, “I’m not going to make it to the ground-breaking. Twist a few arms because we need a few more dollars.”

“He had Infinity on his mind right to the last minute,” said Schloegel.

The building will cost \$28 million and the exhibits \$10 million more. The board has raised \$24 million through the federal and state government and contributions from corporations and individuals. The Mississippi Band of Choctaws presented a check for \$125,000 during Thursday’s ground-breaking.

“The fundraising is not over yet,” said McFarland. A \$2 Our Hero campaign launched Nov. 14 on Haise’s 75th birthday has a goal of raising \$4 million for construction, with people all over the country donating \$2.

“We sure do need that \$4 million,” said Haise.