



Visitors at the Challenger Learning Center will get the opportunity for hands-on, space-themed enrichment activities. PHOTO PROVIDED

Challenger Learning Center, MARK II Voyager coming to Watertown

Kerry Drager Watertown Public Opinion
USA TODAY NETWORK

Watertown has been chosen as home to the first Challenger Learning Center in South Dakota.

This interactive space-themed experience will encourage children and youth of all ages to explore the wonders of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The Challenger Learning Center is part of the Sisters of Mother of God Monastery legacy project. They have dedicated 25 acres of their land to become the home to this hands-on, simulated learning adventure.

“This is something more than we could ever have imagined,” said Sister Barb Younger of the monastery. “It will serve the people of this region far beyond our years on this earth.”

The 25 acres designated for the park is prairie land that has been undisturbed by time and development. It will not only be the site of the learning center, but will also be home to the MARK II Voyager scaled solar system. It's an educational model that will include 13 learning points that stretch more than 2,000 feet, creating a sense of the vast distance between objects

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and planets in our solar system.

The overall cost of the learning center and Voyager solar system is projected to be \$10 million. More information on fundraising will be released later this month.

The Challenger Learning Center is not only unique to South Dakota but also surrounding states.

“There are 300 school districts within 90 miles from here. If you consider just the middle schoolers, there are 20,000 within

90 miles of Watertown. That is a great impact,” said Younger. “It is its own non-profit, and it belongs to Watertown.”

Mike Cartney, president of Lake Area Technical College, is a member of the committee helping to make the Challenger Learning Center and MARK II Voyager possible at Harmony Hill.

“It’s a way to provide young people the means to develop a passion for STEM careers and for space flight,” said Cartney.

The Challenger Learning Center will mimic the moon landing, mission control, shuttle launch, life on the space station

and more. It is an evolving experience for visitors that changes depending on the child’s grade level and if they had visited before.

“There are different missions and learning objectives per grade,” said Cartney. “It also has learning experiences for adults and college-age students.”

The learning center will have a novelty side as well as learning. For example, a Valentine’s Day surprise could be a date to the moon.

“It has an entrepreneur side of things. It will help show how much of South Dakota industry has in association with

STEM, specifically those for space,” said Cartney.

Cartney said South Dakota already plays a significant role in making advancements into space possible. Raven Industries is one such industry with manufacturing done in South Dakota helping to design and create components used in the space fleet.

The inspiration doesn’t stop with space-themed industries. STEM careers are a vital, ever-changing industry in the state. Inspiring students to join STEM fields and stay in South Dakota is important to the continued growth and success of many industries,

including agriculture.

“It will help to get young people energized, and this falls right in line with our mission statement at LATC and getting those technical skills into South Dakota. Will this bring more? I sure hope so. With our workforce shortage at a critical point, this is not only something that will attract youth to stay in South Dakota, but will attract those from Minnesota, North Dakota and Nebraska as well,” said Cartney.