Construction starts on new Exploratorium home

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The beloved bangs, whistles and explosions of San Francisco's Exploratorium will soon move into a vast new waterfront home on the city's famed Embarcadero.

"We are about to multiply our impact several-fold," said Dennis Bartels, executive director of the Exploratorium.

Founded in 1969 by noted physicist Frank Oppenheimer, the Exploratorium is considered the prototype for hands-on museums around the world.

But the science museum -- known for innovative creations and experiments -- had outgrown its birthplace at the Palace of Fine Arts, an elegant Greek pergola next to an artificial lagoon that dates back to the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition.

Opening in 2012, the new nine-acre campus on Piers 15 and 17 will not only be larger and more modern, but far more accessible from San Francisco's suburbs. It will be a more 10-minute walk from the Ferry Building, at the nexus of public transit.

And unlike the current facility, the new Exploratorium will take advantage of its premier place on San Francisco Bay, allowing a new emphasis on environmental science.

"It is wonderful news," said Christine Bertrand, executive director of the California Science Teachers Association. "With science being cut drastically from the public schools, especially at the elementary levels, independent institutions like the Exploratorium are even more important than before."

"They needed to get out of their current location," she said. "And the expansion of environmental education is really important."

The museum will celebrate its groundbreaking at a ceremony this morning.

The project was conceived six years ago, and has successfully navigated a gauntlet of planning procedures. So far, it has netted more than $200 million of the $300 million needed to pay for the final project, according to Exploratorium spokeswoman Leslie Patterson.

Two anonymous gifts, totaling $90 million, came from prominent leaders in the high-tech industry.

Already, the dredging has begun. Pier 15 is the first priority, where engineers will soon drive piles 160 feet deep to replace or repair the pier's hundreds of dilapidated pilings. Refurbishing and upgrading a historic pier that spans the length of almost three football fields over the water is expected to be a major engineering feat.

The second phase, Pier 17's renovation, will take place in the more distant future.

"It is going to be a great new attraction to the waterfront that should bring lots of families to enjoy a tremendous exhibit," said Bob Batha of the San...
Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission.

"By making use of San Francisco Bay, using a very creative group of individuals, it should be a great learning experience for many people of the Bay Area," he said.

Highlights include its iconic exhibits in four large galleries; space for professional teacher training; room for after-school programs and education camps; a theater; a store; and a cafe. At the eastern end of the piece, a glass structure called the Observatory Building, conceived like an aperture, will offer spectacular views of the bay.

"The new building along the waterfront will educate a whole new generation of young and old minds who share a love of science and the environment," said San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom.

"It will both revitalize crumbling piers and reinvent the Exploratorium experience," he said.

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