

A birthday celebration for the Discovery Museum

By Val Van Meter
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — If you were a raindrop, where would you go?

The answer can be found in the Minotaur Maze.



Former astronaut
Kathryn Thornton

This newest exhibit of the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum will debut at Saturday's birthday celebration and groundbreaking for the museum's new site in Jim Barnett Park.

The public is invited to attend.

At 1 p.m., local officials and members of the museum's board of directors will move symbolic shovels of earth for the planned 21,000 square-foot "green building."

The Reader and Swartz design has been rated "platinum" by the U.S. Green Building Council, according to Dee Dee Barbour, capital campaign director.

Platinum is the highest rating offered by the council, which promotes environmentally friendly and energy-efficient construction.

The building will feature recycled materials, a sod roof, energy-efficient design, and water-efficient landscaping, as well as more space for exhibits.

Then at 2 p.m., it will be time to celebrate the museum's 11th anniversary with ice cream, face-painting, music, and a bubble-blowing contest.

And the maze.

The new exhibit is thousand-square-feet of panels which blend education and physical activity, Barbour said.

The maze comes from Minotaur, a Seattle firm which builds interactive educational maze exhibits.

The theme of this maze is "Watershed, Wildlife and Wonders." Other Minotaur mazes in Virginia include a dinosaur theme in Danville, and a Jamestown focus in Newport News.

In Winchester, visitors can follow a raindrop on its life cycle, and learn why nearly 70 percent of the earth is covered with water, but less than 1 percent is available to drink.

Barbour said the maze was purchased through support from the Monford D. and Lucy L. Custer Foundation, the Joseph and Bessie Feinberg Foundation and Ellen Morgan. Its appearance at the birthday celebration is sponsored by Bowman Consulting.

The maze is versatile, she said, and its theme can be changed.

Barbour said the capital campaign to create a new home for the museum is about halfway to its goal.

The new museum will cost about \$8 million, but the campaign goal is \$10 million, she said, in order to provide \$1 million for new exhibits and another million to cover initial operating expenses.

“We have a little more fundraising to do before we start moving any earth,” said Barbour. So far, \$4.5 million has been pledged.

The museum is also celebrating a new spokesperson and a new look at its Web site.

There, former astronaut Kathryn Thornton, who has logged 975 hours in space on four missions, tells parents and children why science is important to lives and careers.

“I did a talk there some years ago,” said Thornton, who now teaches at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. “It’s a pretty cool little museum.”

The astronaut, whose four flights included 21 hours of extra-vehicular activity, helped to deploy satellites, boost a wayward satellite into a higher orbit, and fix the damaged optics on the Hubble Space Telescope.

She is associate dean for graduate programs in the School of Engineering and Applied Science at the university, where she earned a doctorate in physics in 1979.

Looking down on the Earth from space is “pretty spectacular,” Thornton said.

Our planet is “living, breathing, powerful, and the closest thing to the astronaut’s view that most of us can see is the IMAX film, ‘Blue Planet,’” she said.

The expanded Web site was designed by Jan E. Lower of the Power/Warner Communication Group.

“They are going to have a state-of-the-art facility. They needed a state-of-the-art Web site,” Lower said.

The new site includes a floor plan of the current museum, where a click can tell viewers what they can see in each room.

One section is aimed at teachers, said Niki Wilson, director of marketing and development for the museum.

“It shows all the programs we offer that correlate with the Standards of Learning,” she said.

At www.discoverymuseum.net science projects are available for parents to try at home with their children.

“They are simple and fun, and they don’t make too much of a mess,” Wilson said.

The idea is to get all youngsters interested in science and the fun of learning.

And that could be very important for the future.

“We can’t destroy the earth,” said Thornton. “But we could make it a place where we can’t live.”