

# Bozeman Daily Chronicle

---

## Old Faithful Visitor Education Center to open next week

By JODI HAUSEN, Chronicle Staff Writer Aug 20, 2010



ERIK PETERSEN/CHRONICLE Workers finish the roof of the new Visitor Education Center at Old Faithful Thursday.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK -- As if on cue, Old Faithful Geyser erupted just moments before a Thursday morning tour of the new Old Faithful Visitor Education Center.

The steam and water shooting high into the air was clearly visible through a huge window in the lobby.

“What I love about that window is how perfectly it frames Old Faithful Geyser,” said Linda Young, Yellowstone Park’s chief of interpretation and education.

Nearly eight years in the making - two-and-a-half years in construction time alone - the interpretive center will open to the public Wednesday, on the park’s 94th birthday, and provide the millions who visit the geyser each year a better understanding of the park’s geothermal features and its wildlife.

The \$27 million center is intended as a place to help visitors better understand the “amazing features” they see in America’s first national park, Young said.

Yellowstone is “a bizarre and extreme environment where wildlife lives,” she said. “People don’t think of hot, acidic environments as habitats and some of the exhibits introduce that idea.”

“I’m ecstatic,” said Al Nash, Yellowstone’s spokesman, as he stood in the cavernous lobby.

He was seeing the exhibits for the first time Thursday. “It’s a great place to bring people, where they can learn about what they’re seeing and will prompt them to go out and see more of the park,” Nash said.

## **The exhibits**

In the middle of the “Young Scientist” section of the center stands what will likely be one of its more popular exhibits: a mechanical glass model of a geyser that demonstrates how geysers work.

Water boils up, builds up pressure, is pushed up through a constricted pipe and then erupts to the ceiling. Temperature and pressure gauges attached to the contraption, reminiscent of a mad scientist’s lab, further explain the physics at play.

“It really just illustrates the simple aspects of a geyser,” Young said.

The education center had to highlight Old Faithful, she said, “but we wanted this to be about all the hydrothermal features in the park. Many people don’t know that it is believed there are more than 10,000 hydrothermal features in Yellowstone.”

Another exhibit with a thermal pool, dead lodgepole pines, a coyote, a yellow-bellied marmot, bison scat and animal tracks asks viewers to identify the signs of animal and plant life. There is also a wall of animal track molds that people can touch, touch-screen videos and interactive displays. Text for the displays is in English, Spanish, French, German and Japanese.

In addition to the interpretive displays, the center houses a 219-seat theater, a gift shop, a small library and a ranger-staffed information desk.

## **The building**

Park officials were also proud to point out Thursday that the center had been awarded gold-level Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, certification.

And about 26 percent of the building materials are recycled, said Ted Conover, project manager for CTA Architects Engineers of Billings.

The roofing shingles are recycled rubber made to look like wood.

The exterior walls and information desk were constructed from reused fieldstones.

And more than 99 percent -- 4,800 tons -- of the project’s construction waste was recycled, including concrete from the old visitor’s center that was crushed and used as backfill, according to a fact sheet.

In addition to making the building as green as possible, the architects, by layering different materials, were hoping to create a building where “the more you dig into, the more you find,” Conover said.

“When kids get up close to the rocks (on the information desk), they’ll see or feel the lichen on them, but from a distance they’re just rock,” he said.

Some of the desk rocks came from the Gibbon Bridge project, with help from the project manager, said Peter Galindo, a mechanical engineer in the park.

“I owe that engineer a bunch of cookies,” he said.

For ventilation, architects included windows at the apex of the 60-foot ceiling that open, allowing hot air to flow out, as fresh air flows in through ducts at floor level, said Galindo, who also oversaw the reconstruction of the Old Faithful Inn. The ventilation system reduces the need for air conditioning.

### **The challenges**

But getting to this point wasn’t easy, said Josh Mullaney, project manager for contractor Swank Enterprises of Valier.

“Every aspect of this building was challenging,” he said. “From the logistics of working in the park to winter construction, complicated design and running a ‘man camp’ hotel” for his employees.

“The challenge of everyone being away from their families impacted our morale,” and there was a lot of stress on him and other project managers because of the complexity of the design, Mullaney said.

As he spoke, roofers attached shingles atop the building and artisans put the final touches on the exhibits inside.

Yet, he said, it was all worth it.

“The more challenging the project, the more you appreciate it in the end,” Mullaney said.

### **The money**

The Yellowstone Park Foundation raised more \$15 million for the project, more than half of the \$27 million cost.

The other \$12 million was matched with federal funds, said Karen Bates Kress, the foundation president.

“We definitely wanted it to be a public-private partnership,” Bates Kress said.

More than 400 people pitched in financially, with donations ranging from \$2 to \$3 million, she said. Seven donors -- some individual, some corporate -- contributed \$1 million each to the campaign that ended in 2005.

The Old Faithful Visitor Education Center is the foundation’s largest project to date, according to a foundation fact sheet.

“This building exists because of the money that Yellowstone Park Foundation rounded up,” Nash added.

The Old Faithful Visitor Education Center will open to the public officially at 11 a.m. Wednesday.

Jodi Hausen can be reached at [jhausen@dailychronicle.com](mailto:jhausen@dailychronicle.com) or 582-2630. Read her blog at [jhausen.wordpress.com](http://jhausen.wordpress.com) or follow her on Twitter [@bozemancrime](https://twitter.com/bozemancrime).

---

### If You Go

The Old Faithful Visitor Education Center will open to the public officially at 11 a.m. Wednesday.