

OPENING ATTENDANCE LIGHT AT NEW MUSEUM

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SMALLER THAN expected crowds didn't put a damper on opening-day festivities at the City Museum on the western side of downtown Saturday.

Shrieks and laughs from youngsters could be heard throughout the day. The museum is designed for children and adults, and many parents followed their children through secret passages and down slides.

The 1,381 paid attendees fell short of the 5,000 that had been predicted by the museum. Executive director Gail Cassilly said the day was a success nevertheless.

"It's been a crazy, wild, fun atmosphere here. There has definitely been a lot of activity," she said.

The Tidal Sea Cave on the first floor was one of the more popular spots for museum-goers Saturday afternoon.

Cheryl Verzal, 25, a museum volunteer, was dressed as a mermaid near the large replica cave.

She offered hints to kids and parents on how to explore the area. However, she said the museum's main goal was to let children find things for themselves.

"When they discover something new, they go and tell everyone else," she said.

She said there are secret passageways and nooks and crannies throughout. Many kids found their way to the sky tunnel, which is connected to a giant bird's nest made from tree branches.

Meanwhile, parts of the museum, at 701 North 15th Street, seemed deserted. With more than 100,000 feet on the first three floors of the former International Shoe and Rand Shoe Companies building, the museum has a lot of empty space, particularly on the third floor.

Organizers say new exhibits will go there in the future.

Linda Batchie, 47, of Fenton, said she and her husband, Mark, 45, liked the museum "but they still have a lot of work to do."

Among other things, the museum has a traveling dinosaur exhibit, architectural displays and Art City - an interactive forum for glassmakers, potters and other artists.

Graham Tucker celebrated his 11th birthday with a party in the museum. Besides eating a green cake, Graham said he and his friends chased each other around most of the afternoon.

"It's really fun," he said.

- Caption: PHOTOCOLOR Photo by Jerry Naunheim Jr./Post-Dispatch - Austin Fitzgerald, 4, of Ballwin, waits for his mother after deciding not to follow the crowd into a tunnel at the new City Museum Saturday. The tunnel goes into the mouth of a life-sized bowhead whale.

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