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EXCLUSIVE

Multimillion-dollar renovation in the works for Independence Visitor Center

May 13, 2016, 6:00am EDT



[Kenneth Hilario](#)

Reporter

Philadelphia Business Journal

There are plans for a complete, multimillion-dollar renovation of the [Independence Visitor Center](#) its officials say will redefine the visitor experience.

The visitor center, managed by the Independence Visitor Center Corp., attracts nearly 3 million people a year, but — except for minor changes over the years — it's essentially remained unchanged since it opened in 2001.



The terrace of Independence Visitor Center in Philadelphia.

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“I don’t have to tell you how much the world has changed in the last 15 years or in the last five years,” said President and CEO [James Cuorato](#). “What we have found ... is that visitors today want to access their information in different ways than they did 15 years ago; we’re in the digital age now, and people are much more reliant on devices and using the Internet to get their information.”

IVCC has proposed plans to embark on a \$15 million renovation, the goals of which are to “upgrade and renovate the facilities and bring them up to date,” Cuorato said, “with the primary objective of making sure the visitor experience is the best it can possibly be.”

About \$15 million is needed for the project. IVCC has raised \$2.1 million so far, and has put in a request for a Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) grant for \$3.5 million, which the IVCC must match dollar for dollar if its receives the funds.

The RACP grant process has been “unfortunately complicated by the ongoing logjam over the state budget,” so no decisions have been made yet, but Cuorato said he’s hopeful.

“We think we have a very strong application as far as what we do here, how it impacts the local economy, the jobs it creates and the impact it has on the southeastern Pennsylvania region,” Cuorato said.

IVCC is also amid a capital campaign for the rest of the funds needed for the renovation project. “Certain assets” will be available for sponsorships.

The project, which will be in phases, is tentatively planned to be completed by spring 2018. IVCC will bid the project in July this year and construction will start in September.

“The improvements and expansion is only going to make things much better,” said Terese Balzereit, director of business operations at Philadelphia Trolley Works Big Bus, which has been operating at the visitor center since 2007. “It’s tremendous, and it’s only going to help our sales and our sales team.”

Balzereit said the renovations will give the company the opportunity to capture visitors “for a little longer.”

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A CLOSER LOOK

Planned improvements

Addition of six touchscreen, digital displays where guests can plan an itinerary, which they can either have sent to their devices or have printed on site.

An expansion of the gift shop's size by 52 percent, providing more retail space and products, which would increase the shop's revenue by 50 percent.

Conversion of one of the two existing theaters into an open orientation film theater. The existing wall would be replaced by a glass wall and a seven- to 10-minute orientation film about the region and its attractions will be shown.

The front desk will be separated into two distinct, circular information desks: One for the National Park Service and another for the visitor center. Their new placements will be clearly visible from the Market Street entrance, drawing visitors.

Relocation and upgrade of restrooms, including expansion of the women's restrooms and two family restrooms.

Addition of an expanded second-floor, outdoor terrace that will increase the outdoor rentable space.

Improvement of the north end of the center to ease visitor traffic flow through the building.

A designated "trip-planning" area where guests can sit and plan out their visit.

Kenneth Hilario covers hospitality, restaurants and takes on general assignments and breaking news.



Independence Visitor Center redo: Larger terrace, gift shop



Artists

rendering of nighttime view of new second-floor terrace after planned renovations of Center City's Independence Visitor Center. (SaylorGreg)

By Jacob Adelman, Staff Writer

POSTED: May 25, 2016

The Independence Visitor Center plans a \$15 million overhaul that will extend the outdoor terrace and enlarge the gift shop as it aims to generate more cash for operations from the city's growing tourist throng.

The renovation will be the biggest investment at Independence Mall since the early 2000's, when the center and other buildings were constructed as part of a then-new master plan for the National Park Service site.

It comes as the building's operator, the nonprofit Independence Visitor Center Corp., strives to reduce its dependence on the Park Service in an age of recurring federal budget tiffs. The Park Service contributes about \$800,000 to the center's \$4.2 million annual operating budget.

"My position here in leading this organization is to get us to a point where we're self-sufficient," corporation

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president and chief executive James Cuorato said Monday. "It removes any possibility that the appropriation might be negatively impacted in the future."

University of Pennsylvania political science professor Marc Meredith said it made sense that the center would want to become less reliant on federal funds after the government shutdown of 2013 and subsequent battles.

They "are trying to protect themselves so they have less dependence on federal revenue, on the chance that the federal government shuts down again in some looming budget battle," he said. "Relying on the appropriations process generates too much uncertainty to make plans going forward."

The center extends about two-thirds of a block north of Market Street along the western edge of Independence Mall, and has information counters, tour concessionaires, and theaters playing historical documentaries. It was completed in 2001 in a spate of building that also included the National Constitution Center and the Liberty Bell Center.

Planners want to enlarge by 50 percent the gift shop, the center's biggest moneymaker, into an area now occupied by public restrooms. The restrooms would move to a planned 2,000-square-foot addition on the Independence Mall side.

The roof of the expansion would become a second-floor deck, connecting to an existing patio on the Market Street side. The new outdoor space would help the lucrative business of hosting weddings and other events, Cuorato said.

More changes include the replacement of one of the theaters with a glassed-in screening room, and the installation of informational touchscreen monitors. The aim is to draw visitors who might only be popping in for the gift shop or a restroom into the building's interior, where the concession counters are.

"We want to sort of pull people into the building," Cuorato said.

The plan seeks to capitalize on what have been historically high levels of visitors to the Philadelphia area, as the city burnishes its reputation as a tourist draw. The region hosted 39.7 million in 2014, up 15 percent from a decade earlier, according to the most recent data from Visit Philadelphia, the city tourism-promotion agency.

So far, the center has raised \$2.1 million of the planned \$15 million price tag, and has applied for a \$3.5 million state redevelopment grant. Remaining funds may come from foundations or corporate sponsors, Cuorato said.

The Department of the Interior, which administers Park Service property, is reviewing the project and is expected to share its thoughts on the plan in the next several weeks, said Jennifer Nagle, the corporation's vice president for business development.

No city permits are needed because the center is on federal land, she said.

Work could begin as soon as September and would take about two years, mostly occurring during off-seasons for tourism, Cuorato said.

"It really is time to bring the building up to current standards and redefine the visitor experience," he said.

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Independence Visitor Center to Undergo \$15M Renovation

It will be its first since opening 15 years ago

By [Melissa Romero](#) Jun 6, 2016, 8:30am



The Independence Visitor Center is planning a \$15 million renovation, its first since opening 15 years ago. *Renderings by SaylorGregg*

It's been 15 years since the Independence Visitor Center opened its doors at Market and 6th streets as part of Independence National Historical Park's master plan. And president and CEO Jim Cuorato knows it's time for a change.

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After four years of planning, the most-visited venue in Southeastern Pennsylvania is about to undergo a \$15 million renovation that will include a new upper-level terrace, a bigger gift shop, new bathrooms, and more welcoming, well, welcome desks.

"So much has changed in the last 15 years," says Cuorato. "We wanted to update the building and give it a more modern feel, keeping in mind we are in a historical district.

He adds, "But most importantly, we want to enhance the visitors' experience by giving them information in different ways."

That includes new touch-screens that will line a wall, allowing visitors to plan their stay in Philadelphia and download their agenda onto their smartphones. For those still looking for that personal interaction with the multilingual staff, they'll be nearby at a new welcome desk.

In addition, the second movie theater will be enclosed by a glass wall and feature a 7- to 10-minute orientation video to the city.

"The idea is to get people excited about being here," says Cuorato.



The second movie theater will be enclosed by a glass wall and feature a short video about Philadelphia. The first movie theater will stay as is and feature a National Parks Service video.

But one of the biggest renovations will involve the gift shop. It's currently located at the entrance off Market and 6th Street. But as the biggest source of revenue for Independence Visitor Center, it's also the most cramped.

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"During our busiest times in the summer, it's literally elbow-to-elbow in here," says Cuorato. "It's not a pleasant browsing experience."

The plan is to expand the gift shop by 50 percent. In order to do that, the bathrooms will move to the right side of the building that faces the mall.

“We want to enhance the visitors' experience by giving them information in different ways”

The redesign will also aim to encourage visitors to walk up to the new welcome desks from the Market and 6th Street entrance, via digital screens that will line the walls.

"When people come in, they see the gift shop and restroom, but they don't know what's up there," Cuorato says, pointing toward the welcome desks. "So one of the things we wanted to do is make it generally pull people into the building and let them know that good information is up ahead."

At the other end of the building, the sightseeing tours will be lined up in a more coherent fashion and the grab-and-go food stations will move to the very end. Visitors will also be able to sit and work out their travel schedules in a new Trip Planning station. Currently, tourists tend to sit on the floors or stairs while planning their travel agenda, says Cuorato.



One end of the visitor center will include a Trip Planning area for families to gather and schedule tours during their stay.

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In total, the renovation is expected to cost \$15 million and is being designed by local architects SaylorGregg, the same firm behind the Franklin Institute's recent renovations.

The Independence Visitor, which is owned by the National Parks Service but managed by a 501c3 non-profit organization, has raised \$2 million to date. It also has an application in for a \$3.2 million grant from the Redevelopment Assistant Capital Program.

If all goes to plan, Cuorato says construction bids should begin in July. The first phase of the renovation—the bathrooms—will start in September after the Democratic National Convention.

The whole renovation is estimated to take two years, and the center plans to remain open.

"I think it's going to really enhance everything we're doing right now," says Cuorato. "Every person that comes into the visitor center needs to have a pleasant and a positive experience. Because in a lot of cases, we are their first impression of Philadelphia."



Renovation at Independence Visitor Center anticipates boom in Philly tourism

CEO Jim Cuorato sees unique opportunity to enhance travel throughout the region

June 18, 2016



Gift shop display at Independence Visitor Center.

Michael Tanenbaum/PhillyVoice



BY **MICHAEL TANENBAUM**
PhillyVoice Staff, Tanenbaum@phillyvoice.com

Take a walk along the block of 5th and Market streets on any given day and you'll find droves of students at Independence Mall, tour groups getting their bearings straight, promotional events in full swing — the sort of commotion befitting a city that notched a record 41 million domestic visitors in 2015, according to [annual statistics](#) released by Visit Philly.

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Among those travelers to the City of Brotherly love, a full 88 percent, or 36.2 million, came here for leisure. As Lonely Planet confirmed with Philly's [first place rank as a national destination in 2016](#), people are increasingly booking stays in Philadelphia because it's seen as a premier city for recreation.

That's the impetus behind a \$15 million, two-year renovation at the [Independence Visitor Center](#), a private 501c3 non-profit owned in a unique partnership by the National Park Service.

Without closing its doors to the public at any point, work will include an expanded gift shop, a wrap-around upper-level terrace, revamped information desks, new bathrooms, an improved cafe, and a bay of digital screens for visitors to plan and download their itineraries. All of this will happen at what is arguably Philadelphia's most historically significant site.



Independence Visitor Center. *SOURCE/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE*

"If somebody asked you to name the best place to put a visitor center in Philadelphia, the pin would be dropped exactly where we're at," said Jim Cuorato, who has proudly served as CEO of the Independence Visitor Center for the past six years.

He's not kidding. Independence Hall, which sits inside the 55-acre domain of [Independence National Historical Park](#), is the primary reason Philadelphia gained a seat in the [Organization of World Heritage Cities](#) (OWHC) last fall. That announcement was greeted with considerable fanfare, although the [official meaning of the designation](#) was slightly misleading.

No, Philadelphia as a whole is not a UNESCO World Heritage City. Independence Hall, however, is one of just 23 UNESCO World Heritage sites in the United States. That's what earned Philadelphia a prestigious membership among 250 other cities in the OWHC, a Quebec-based non-profit that promotes economic cooperation and helps grease the wheels for international tourism.

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Spotting an opportunity to steward this influx, Cuorato and his partners at the National Park Service evaluated their many accomplishments in the 15 years since the Independence Visitor Center found a home at 1 North Independence Mall West. It's time, they concluded, to create a tourism hub equipped for the 21st century.

Gateway to Philadelphia

As soon as you set foot inside the Independence Visitor Center, two carpets on an inclined plane will greet you in a dozen different languages. On your left, you'll find a gift shop and a pair of restrooms that staff members say are the most popular attractions on site. This time, they are kidding.

Period actors, present throughout the park grounds, spring the history of Philadelphia to life at the visitor center. One revolutionary seated at an ink well teaches kids how to [finish their signatures with the stylish Adams flourish](#). He explains that this was used to keep signers of the Declaration of Independence from treasonously renegeing on their commitments.

Another young visitor intently watches as a second actor plucks away on a dulcimer. Cuorato is overcome with joy.



Jim Cuorato, CEO of Independence Visitor Center.
SOURCE/INDEPENDENCE VISITOR CENTER

"These smiling faces are what it's all about," Cuorato says. "Every day, people are excited to be here in Philadelphia and our job is to help them plan their experience from dawn past dusk."

Further along in the visitor center, now 50,000 square feet, staff and members of the Park Service stand at front desks and answer every conceivable question a traveler might have. If they don't speak English, multilingual attendants are ready to be of service.

It wasn't always this way. Prior to 2001, the primary information center for travelers was housed in the Fairmount Park Welcome Center at 6th and JFK Boulevard, the iconic saucer-like structure that [will survive](#) a [full scale renovation of LOVE Park](#)

with a [brand new art installation](#).

The birth of the Independence Visitor Center came with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the Delaware River Port Authority, the Annenberg Foundation, the Connelly Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Fifteen years later, the visitor

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center draws 2.5 million people annually — factoring in Independence National Historical Park, it's more than 4 million — and generates between \$200 and \$400 million in annual economic impact.

For the Greater Philadelphia Area, it's anywhere from \$12 to \$24 million in local and state tax revenues each year, including regional commerce in surrounding Montgomery, Bucks, Chester, and Delaware counties.

At a visitor center? Haven't we all seen the dingy huts and sterile cornershops of other destinations? The places that ultimately drive people to the hotel concierge at noon after squandering half a day wondering what on earth to do?



Rendering of front desks at Independence Visitor Center.

SOURCE/SAYLOR GREG

It's different in Philadelphia, says BJ Dunn, Deputy Superintendant at Independence National Historical Park.

"What we have in Philadelphia is unlike any other city in the United States. This public-private partnership between the visitor center and the National Park Service is the ideal primer for historical sightseeing and day planning. From Independence Hall to the Liberty Bell and Carpenters' Hall, travelers can absorb the city's history and then get out to the museums, the restaurants, the ball game, everything. It can all be arranged here."

That last part is one of Cuorato's greatest successes. He's worked out ticket vending and sponsorship deals with a growing list of attractions throughout the Philadelphia area, taking a commission that has proven beneficial for everyone.

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"We can hand out a brochure and encourage people to go somewhere," Cuorato says, "but will they actually go there? We want people to make the most of their trip. When they buy the tickets here, they're definitely going to that Pixar exhibit at the Franklin Institute. They're going to the Phillies game. The feedback we get is just overwhelmingly positive."

'Elbow Room'

As Philadelphia's star continues to rise, the scene at the visitor center has gotten a bit cramped as of late. Travelers pack hallways, exhibits, the small cafe, floors, stairs, anywhere they can to draw up the day's game plan. Cuorato, who carefully observes his guest experience, wants to create a more accommodating and streamlined flow at the Independence Visitor Center.

He's more than prepared for the challenge of raising the full \$15 million needed to complete the renovation.

Cuorato's executive bio includes stints as the city's Commerce Director under former Philadelphia mayors Ed Rendell and John Street. He's served as director of the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation. Before leading the Independence Visitor Center, he was Vice President of Urban Development at Brandywine Realty Trust. He's been a pro at navigating the financial complexity of dozens of major projects Philadelphia.



Rendering of expanded terrace at Independence Visitor Center.

SOURCE/SAYLOR GREGG

This one is special to him.

"Out of all the places I've worked before, I've never seen such a genuine representation of Philadelphia as I do here at Independence Visitor Center," Cuorato says. "We have the mechanisms in place to reach our goals by working with foundations and some private sponsors."

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Seated over a blueprint of the renovations, Cuorato explains that the renovation is designed to create a more logical flow from end-to-end of the visitor center. That starts with repositioning the restrooms in order to expand the gift shop, which is the visitor center's biggest source of revenue.

"The replica Liberty Bells are our top-selling product," Cuorato says, "although the political stuff has been flying off the shelves."

He means bobbleheads of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, or a moose-printed "Moving to Canada" T-shirt for those who feel the nation is heading astray. If they need a reminder of our heritage, just behind the gift shop's front wall is the "Indelible" glass sculpture featuring text from the Declaration of Independence, a public art installation from the center's earliest days. It has already endured a spider-webbed crack not unlike the fissure on the real Liberty Bell.

"This renovation will increase gift shop sales by 50 percent," Cuorato confidently estimates. "Just by giving people more space to browse."



Rendering or renovation outside theatres at Independence Visitor Center.

SOURCE/SAYLORGREGG

Moving the restrooms and expanding the gift shop is only the first step in the process, which will progress from front to back. Two new information desks will be dedicated, respectively, to event planning with visitor center staff and to tour groups organized by the National Park Service. The existing mezzanine terrace — one of the best views in Philadelphia — will wrap around the building opposite the gift shop and open up additional space for events, banquets and weddings.

The two theaters and exhibit spaces at the visitor center, meanwhile, will both remain in place with upgrades and a brand new 7-10 minute video that acts as an introduction and invitation to Philadelphia.

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To date, the Independence Visitor Center has raised \$2 million and has a pending \$3.2 million grant application from the state's Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program. The project, designed by local architects SaylorGregg, will be completed without federal funding.



Rendering of renovated cafe at Independence Visitor Center

SOURCE/SAYLORGREGG

In Dunn's estimation, the renovation could not be timed to better perfection.

"I've never seen so many pieces come into place all at once for a city as we're seeing in Philadelphia. Between the rising number of visitors, the Pope's recent visit, the upcoming Democratic National Convention, and the growing hospitality sector, Philadelphia is rapidly evolving as a preferred destination, for its history and for its future."

For Jim Cuorato, that promising trajectory is going to mean smiles for miles.



James Cuorato is helping Philly tourism enter the 21st century



By Marc Kramer

In his office, the former drummer of a Beatles cover band is surrounded by pictures and paraphernalia of the Fab Four. Ironically, his job is to promote Philadelphia, and in particular Independence National Historical Park, which celebrates the foiling of a much earlier British invasion. With a knack for serving visitors and a passion for government work, president and CEO James Cuorato is leading the Independence Visitor Center Corporation into an exciting future.

What was your first professional job?

Cuorato: With the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia. It is a city agency that can condemn properties and improve neighborhoods. I interned there during college. When I graduated, they had an opening for a project manager, and the project they needed someone for was The Gallery at Market East. I thought I would do it for a year until I got a real job. I loved it. I stayed in city government for 30 years. I was fortunate to have two stints as the city's director of commerce.



Why did you go into government work?

Cuorato: I didn't have any other opportunities, and little did I know how much I would love public service. I liked that you could make a meaningful difference in the city. During the mid-70s, the Gallery was the first downtown mall to be built in the nation. The mall was built by Jim Rouse. It was huge. The project had everything, and we were breaking new ground. It was exciting and interesting.

What is the best part of your job?

Cuorato: Interaction with visitors. I try to spend four to five hours a week behind the visitor services desk. If I am having a challenging day, I will spend two hours down there and it will boost my spirits. You can't sit behind a desk and know what visitors think. You have to get on the floor and talk to them.

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What is the most difficult part of the job?

Cuorato: The fundraising. As a nonprofit, we need to operate with a balanced budget, so we need to control our costs and continually look for new sources of revenue. The building is 50,000 square feet, so something always needs to be replaced. The building and land are owned by the federal government. The Independence Visitor Center Corporation is a 501c3 nonprofit corporation and we have an agreement with the National Park Service to manage the Center. The National Park Service contributes about 20 percent of our budget, and the other 80 percent I have to earn. We are fortunate to enjoy an excellent partnership with the Park Service. They support us in many ways, and Independence National Historical Park is arguably the city's marquee attraction.

What can Philadelphia do to make itself more competitive?

Cuorato: We don't have direct flights to China, and visitors from China are important to growth for tourism. The more direct flights, the better. If we can continue to expand our air service to make it more convenient for people to get here, that will enhance our reputation globally.

What would people be surprised to know about the Visitors Center?

Cuorato: We sell tickets to about 70 attractions in the area. And we actually operate the PHLASH, a tourist bus loop that stops at the city's major downtown attractions. Our visitors love the service, and we're glad to provide it. Then-Mayor Ed Rendell came up with the idea of a bus loop in the 1990s and we're looking to grow the service each year.

What is the biggest initiative you are working on right now?

Cuorato: Renovating the Visitor Center to bring it up to today's standards in terms of its look and feel and how we serve visitors. The building opened in 2001 and we are more than overdue for a major upgrade. We have assessed the visitor experience and we have looked to see what we can do to improve and enhance it. So we have plans to completely upgrade the Center, and the National Park Service has been fully supportive.

The key elements are an expansion of our gift shop, which is our biggest revenue generator. We are building new restrooms to enable this expansion to take place. We are going to upgrade the visitor services area by building new desks for National Park Service information and tickets for Independence Hall tours, and for information and tickets to Philadelphia and the region's attractions. We are going to add new interactive digital touch screens so people can get their information that way if they so choose. We are going to produce a new orientation film highlighting the National Park's and the region's attractions. And we'll develop a new and upgraded café, new booths for our tour operators, and all-new graphics and signage throughout the building. As with everything we do, the goal is to enhance the visitor experience.

Marc Kramer, a serial entrepreneur and president of Kramer Communications, is the author of five books. Contact him at marc@kramercommunications.com.

Independence Visitor Center gets 'key piece of funding' for major renovation

Nov. 1, 2016, 12:46pm EDT



[Kenneth Hilario](#)

Reporter

Philadelphia Business Journal

The Independence Visitor Center is closer to its redefining renovation after receiving a "key piece of funding" from the state and additional funding from its board of directors. The renovation and expanded amenities will be a boon for Philadelphia, experts say, because it could persuade visitors to stay longer.

The Independence Visitor Center Corp. is embarking on a [\\$15 million renovation](#), which includes updated technology and a reconfigured first floor. It will be the building's first major renovation since it opened in 2001; it has remained essentially unchanged since then.



A rendering of the planned expanded, second-floor terrace of Independence Visitor Center.

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IVCC, which manages the center, was recently approved for a \$2 million Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) grant — a "key piece of funding," [James J. Cuorato](#), IVCC president and CEO, told the Philadelphia Business Journal.

It had been a bit of a waiting game since the IVCC put in a request for \$3.5 million in RACP funding earlier this year; the grant process was "complicated" by a state budget logjam.

"We're grateful the state recognized the value we bring to the local economy and the hospitality industry," Cuorato said. "That was a huge boost for us; we think we have a pathway to complete the funding for the project."

The visitor center generates between \$200 million and \$400 million in economic impact annually and attracts nearly 3 million people a year. Cuorato said he expects this year's final visitation figure to be a 5 percent increase over 2015.

The IVCC board in September also authorized an additional \$3.5 million from its endowment, which is on top of an initial authorization of \$1.3 million, bringing the direct contribution to \$4.8 million.

The board is matching the RACP grant dollar for dollar; the \$2 million match will come from the \$4.8 million. The board has also authorized IVCC to explore financing options alone.

"We have enough funding in place to complete the first phase of the project, which is at the South end of the building," said Cuorato, who said the project was put out to bid in mid-October. "We hope to award a contract just before Thanksgiving."

If all goes well, it will be under construction before the end by mid-December.

The renovation project is called the Visitor Experience Improvement Program, "and that really sums up the number one goal of this project," Cuorato said. "It's to improve and enhance the visitor experience."

Visitor centers play an important role in helping to orchestrate visits to a destination, according [Wesley S. Roehl](#), professor of tourism management at Temple University's School of Sport, Tourism & Hospitality Management, so updates to a visitor center, especially major ones, are significant.

"They represent a contact point between not just the attraction and the visitor, but also the broader destination and the visitor," Roehl said. "Steps to make a visitor center more welcoming likely facilitate the chance that a visitor will come in and learn about additional things to do in Philadelphia."

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In tourism, travel and hospitality, the environment where experiences — the "product" — take place are often as important or more important than the products and services consumed, according to [Mark Lang](#), associate professor at St. Joseph's University.

"Therefore, investments in maintaining and updating the physical visitor center are an investment in the experience people seek when visiting Philadelphia, i.e. the 'product,'" Lang said. "This is analogous to product marketers such as P&G and Apple updating their packaging every several years."

This is important for the Independence Visitor Center in a world of review sites where people rate and share their experiences in real time and "leave records for others to preview when deciding where to go and what to do in Philadelphia — and potentially, whether to visit Philadelphia," Lang said.

A visitor center with updated amenities could also potentially have visitors stay longer, increasing the chance of visitors' exposure to information and persuasion to do more in Philadelphia, Temple's Roehl said.

Visitors are staying longer in the Philadelphia region; the average length of stay for overnight leisure visitors to Greater Philadelphia is 2.6 nights, according to Visit Philadelphia. The national average is 3.5 nights.

Last year, 41 million people visited the Philadelphia region. Direct visitor spending generated \$10.7 billion in economic impact, or \$29 million a day.

Kenneth Hilario covers hospitality, restaurants and takes on general assignments and breaking news.

Independence Visitor Center multi-year major renovation officially underway

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[Kenneth Hilario](#)

Reporter

Philadelphia Business Journal

Update: The \$15 million renovation of the Independence Visitor Center is officially underway. Here is additional information:

- ***The project architect is JacobsWyper Architects; the general contractor is Bittenbender Construction***
- ***The first phase of construction will be underway until May 2018***
- ***The second phase is dependent on available funds with a completion goal of February 2019. The Independence Visitor Center Corp. is raising funds for the second phase of construction.***
- ***Access to the Visitor Center will not be interrupted. It will be open 363 days a year – closed Thanksgiving and Christmas Day – from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. It will be open until 7 p.m. in June, July and August.***



A rendering of the planned expanded, second-floor terrace of Independence Visitor Center.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

The Independence Visitor Center is closer to its redefining renovation after receiving a "key piece of funding" from the state and additional funding from its board of directors. The renovation and expanded amenities will be a boon for Philadelphia, experts say, because it could persuade visitors to stay longer.

The Independence Visitor Center Corp. is embarking on a [\\$15 million renovation](#), which includes updated technology and a reconfigured first floor. It will be the building's first major renovation since it opened in 2001; it has remained essentially unchanged since then.

IVCC, which manages the center, was recently approved for a \$2 million Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) grant — a "key piece of funding," [James J. Cuorato](#), IVCC president and CEO, told the Philadelphia Business Journal.

It had been a bit of a waiting game since the IVCC put in a request for \$3.5 million in RACP funding earlier this year; the grant process was "complicated" by a state budget logjam.

"We're grateful the state recognized the value we bring to the local economy and the hospitality industry," Cuorato said. "That was a huge boost for us; we think we have a pathway to complete the funding for the project."

The visitor center generates between \$200 million and \$400 million in economic impact annually and attracts nearly 3 million people a year. Cuorato said he expects this year's final visitation figure to be a 5 percent increase over 2015.

The IVCC board in September also authorized an additional \$3.5 million from its endowment, which is on top of an initial authorization of \$1.3 million, bringing the direct contribution to \$4.8 million.

The board is matching the RACP grant dollar for dollar; the \$2 million match will come from the \$4.8 million. The board has also authorized IVCC to explore financing options alone.

"We have enough funding in place to complete the first phase of the project, which is at the South end of the building," said Cuorato, who said the project was put out to bid in mid-October. "We hope to award a contract just before Thanksgiving."

If all goes well, it will be under construction before the end by mid-December.

The renovation project is called the Visitor Experience Improvement Program, "and that really sums up the number one goal of this project," Cuorato said. "It's to improve and enhance the visitor experience."

Visitor centers play an important role in helping to orchestrate visits to a destination, according [Wesley S. Roehl](#), professor of tourism management at Temple University's School

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

of Sport, Tourism & Hospitality Management, so updates to a visitor center, especially major ones, are significant.

"They represent a contact point between not just the attraction and the visitor, but also the broader destination and the visitor," Roehl said. "Steps to make a visitor center more welcoming likely facilitate the chance that a visitor will come in and learn about additional things to do in Philadelphia."

In tourism, travel and hospitality, the environment where experiences — the "product" — take place are often as important or more important than the products and services consumed, according to [Mark Lang](#), associate professor at St. Joseph's University.

"Therefore, investments in maintaining and updating the physical visitor center are an investment in the experience people seek when visiting Philadelphia, i.e. the 'product,'" Lang said. "This is analogous to product marketers such as P&G and Apple updating their packaging every several years."

This is important for the Independence Visitor Center in a world of review sites where people rate and share their experiences in real time and "leave records for others to preview when deciding where to go and what to do in Philadelphia — and potentially, whether to visit Philadelphia," Lang said.

A visitor center with updated amenities could also potentially have visitors stay longer, increasing the chance of visitors' exposure to information and persuasion to do more in Philadelphia, Temple's Roehl said.

Visitors are staying longer in the Philadelphia region; the average length of stay for overnight leisure visitors to Greater Philadelphia is 2.6 nights, according to Visit Philadelphia. The national average is 3.5 nights.

Last year, 41 million people visited the Philadelphia region. Direct visitor spending generated \$10.7 billion in economic impact, or \$29 million a day.

Kenneth Hilario covers hospitality, restaurants and takes on general assignments and breaking news.



Independence Visitor Center Undergoing Renovations

March 9, 2017 9:31 PM By Steve Tawa



PHILADELPHIA (CBS) — Without closing its doors to the public, one of the most visited spots in Philadelphia is getting a renovation job intended to make everyone’s experience better – whether it’s hitting the gift shop, or the bathroom.

Fencing is up and construction equipment abounds, but the Independence Visitor Center at 6th and Market Streets, which opened in 2001, will continue to welcome folks without interruption during the \$15,000,000 two-year renovation.

“We felt it was time to upgrade our amenities, our technology, and enhance the visitor experience,” said James Cuorato, the Visitor Center’s CEO.

He says they are expanding the gift shop and relocating the rest rooms.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

“So we’re going to bump the building out, just about 12-15 feet at the southern end of the building, closest to Market Street,” Cuorato explained.

He says visitors have only nice things to say about their bathroom experiences, which are important, if you’ve done any traveling.

“And one of the advantages of bumping the building out, and relocating the restrooms, is that it will give us the ability to build a terrace above the new restrooms, and that will wrap around to our existing terrace, which faces Independence Hall,” Cuorato said.

The upgrade also includes new digital touch-screens for visitors to download information to their smart phones and electronic devices.

-Steve Tawa

Steve Tawa joined KYW Newsradio in 1990, and splits his time between reporting and anchoring.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

INDUSTRY NEWS > TRAVEL & TOURISM Apr 4, 2017, 2:22pm EDT



Alison Burdo

Digital Producer

Philadelphia Business Journal

Interactive kiosks with up-to-date information about tourist activities and a new permanent exhibit that includes pieces of a 150-year-old flag used by [Abraham Lincoln](#) are among the initiatives three Old City institutions and a Wilmington, Del. museum have planned thanks to \$1.8 million in grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The National Constitution Center, Independence Visitor Center and the Hagley Museum and Library, the site of the gunpowder works founded by E.I du Pont in 1802, will each receive \$500,000, Pew announced Tuesday. The American Philosophical Society received a \$300,000 grant.



ALISON BURDO

For each institution – selected because of their work to "inform the public about the history of the nation's democracy and enduring contributions of American enterprise history of the nation's democracy and enduring contributions of American enterprise and innovation," the

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

funds will be distributed over the next three years with the exception of the National Constitution Center, which has two years.

The NCC will use its \$500,000 in grant funding over to create a permanent exhibit related to the Civil War and the Reconstruction period and their impact on the U.S. Constitution. The exhibit will include fragments of the flag President [Abraham Lincoln](#) raised at Independence Hall in 1861 ahead of his inauguration.

Independence Visitor Center will spend its grant on interactive kiosks, as well as increased seating and expanded customer service stations – all an effort to enhance the experience of visitors at some of the city's most high-profile historical sites.

The American Philosophical Society, located on 5th Street in Old City, will host forums with its funds. Each will be recorded and archived to serve as a long-time resource. The forums will focus on the "history of pathbreaking scientific developments and their impact on society," Pew said in a statement.

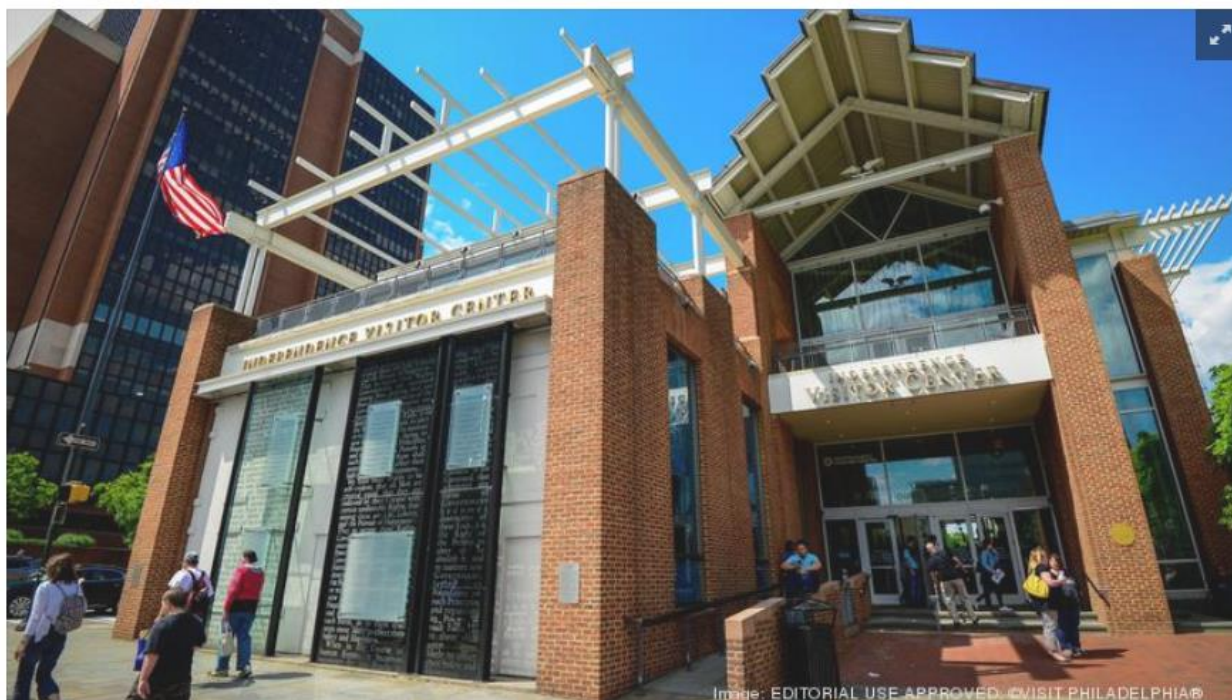
Farther south in Delaware, the \$500,000 will launch the Hagley Heritage Curators initiative, which will support expanded services for businesses and trade associations while boosting the institution's collections.

“These investments build on Pew’s legacy of supporting distinguished institutions that are dedicated to promoting the rich cultural and historical heritage of the region and the nation. We are pleased to support their important contributions,” Frazierita Klasen, the vice president overseeing Pew’s work in Philadelphia, said in a statement.

PHILADELPHIA
BUSINESS JOURNAL

Travel & Tourism

Independence Visitor Center hits visitation milestone amid multimillion-dollar upgrade



The Independence Visitor Center is amid a multimillion-dollar expansion project. PHOTO BY M. KENKENEDY FOR VISIT PHILADELPHIA®



By [Kenneth Hilario](#)

Reporter, *Philadelphia Business Journal*

October 9, 2017

The Independence Visitor Center will soon be rid of the fences that have graced — and concealed — the property during its multimillion-dollar and multiyear project to enhance the visitor experience, expand amenities and add more outdoor spaces.

The center is also hitting milestone visitation figures while making headwind on its first major renovation since it opened in 2001.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

The Independence Visitor Center **had a record 2016** when 2.5 million came through its doors, marking the largest number of visitors since 2009 and a 5 percent increase from 2015.

2017 is shaping up to be an even better year; the Independence Visitor Center, year to date, had over 2.19 million visitors, a 9.5 percent increase over the same timeframe last year, according to data provided to the Philadelphia Business Journal.

"We're on a good, upward trend despite construction," said [James J. Cuorato](#), president and CEO of the Independence Visitor Center Corp.

The Independence Visitor Center — usually a visitor's first destination in Philadelphia — is amid construction for its \$15 million, multi-year **expansion project** that includes an expanded second-floor, outdoor terrace, and multiple touchscreen, digital displays.

It's dubbed the Visitor Experience Improvement Program.

Click through the accompanying gallery below to see in-progress photos.



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#)

16 photos

About 50 percent of the first phase of is complete. First-phase changes include a new second-floor terrace, new restrooms and an expanded gift shop.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

The new restrooms, which will move across from their current location, will be completed in mid-December and, by the end of the year, the fencing outside of the visitor center will be taken down, according to Cuorato.

The new terrace, connected to the existing public balcony, will be open to the public and provide new views of Independence Mall. It will be closed only for and during private events.

The new terrace will be completed in December this year, and it's slated to be open to the public in spring 2018.

Once the new bathrooms have opened, the old bathrooms will be torn down to make way for the expansion of the gift shop — an expansion of 52 percent, which would increase its revenue by 50 percent.

The goal is to open the expanded gift shop by May 2018, completing first phase. The entire project is slated to be complete in mid-2019.

The second phase focuses on the rest of the building:

- Conversion of one of the two existing theaters into an open orientation film theater. The existing wall will be replaced by a glass wall and 10-minute orientation film about the region and its attractions will run.
- Two distinct, circular information desks: one for the National Park Service and another for the visitor center. This would split up the singular existing desk.
- Digital kiosks displays where guests can plan an itinerary, which they can either have sent to their devices or have printed on site.

About \$12.1 million of the \$15 million goal — or 80 percent — has been raised to date, and about \$4.1 million of the total project cost has been spent, according to information provided by the Independence Visitor Center Corp.

The completion of the second phase will be contingent on fundraising and will be done "piece by piece," Cuorato said.

"If we can get [funding] in place, we can keep going," Cuorato said. "If not, we can start sub-phases."

The goal is to renovate the building from the Market Street side and work up toward Arch Street.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

The funding raised so far was raised through various means, including the corporation's endowment and a loan based on the future revenue of the expanded gift shop.

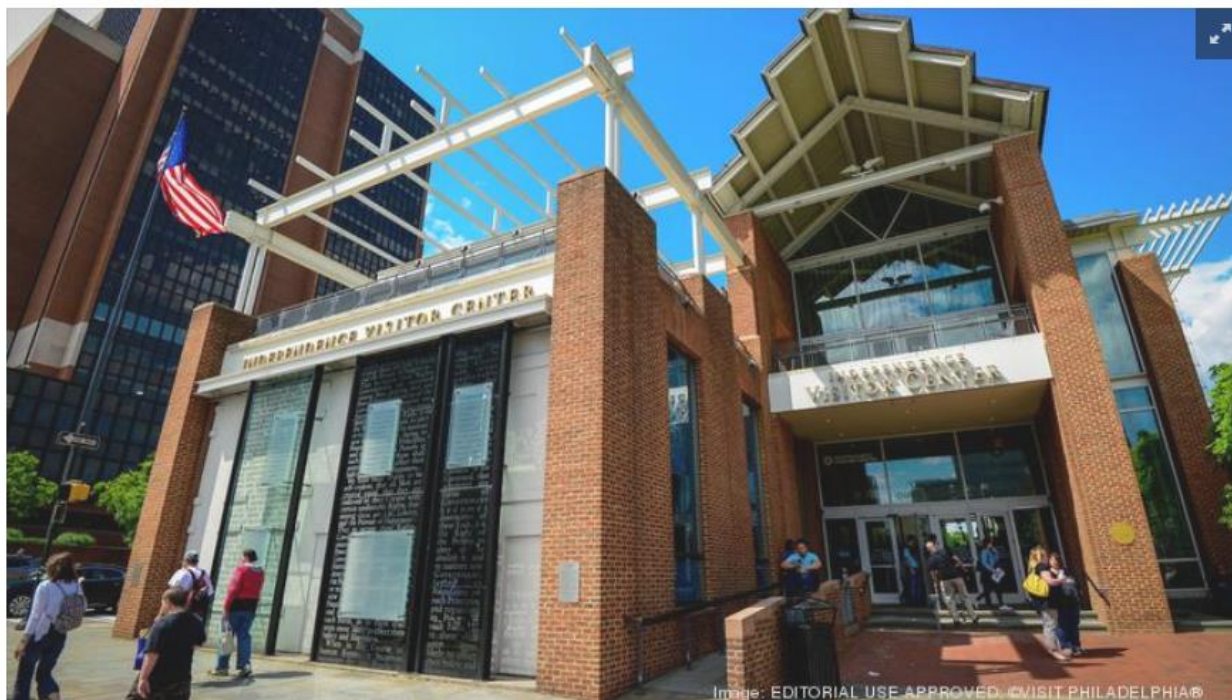
The Independence Visitor Center Corp. will raise the remaining funds through additional state grants and potential partnerships with and sponsorships from corporations.

[The Pew Charitable Trusts](#) in April this year granted \$1.8 million in grants to the Independence Visitor Center and three other historical organizations. The center's \$500,000 grant was put toward the expansion.

The IVCC's Philly Phlash buses saw **record ridership** last year, with a total of 314,496 riders — the largest ridership in its 22 years of service, according to the 2016 annual report given to the Business Journal.

The Independence Visitor Center in 2016 accounted for 48.8 percent of all visitation to Independence National Historical Park, the visitors of which generated nearly \$440 million, according to the report.

Independence Visitor Center being rebranded with new logo & a lot more



By [Kenneth Hilario](#)
Reporter, *Philadelphia Business Journal*
November 17, 2017

The Independence Visitor Center will look different in more ways than one by next year.

The Visitor Center on Independence Mall will roll out a new branding and identity as it inches closer to hitting fundraising goals for a multimillion-dollar expansion project and as visitation figures are exceeded before the year ends. It is undergoing its largest transformation in its 16-year history — a **\$15 million expansion project** slated to be complete in 2019.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

The Independence Visitor Center Corp. (IVCC) as of mid-November has raised \$12.3 million for the project, according to new information given to the *Philadelphia Business Journal* by the corporation. That's up from the \$12.1 million raised as of last month.

Physical changes aren't the only thing happening for the Visitor Center.

The IVCC is working with Fishtown-based digital agency Bluecadet and local designer [Mike Smith](#) from Smith & Diction to develop a new brand, logo and website to meet the needs of the changes taking place inside and outside the building.

"We felt that this was the perfect time to introduce a new brand and logo. Given that the building will be getting a whole new upgraded look, we wanted a new mark that would coincide with and complement the improvements," said [James J. Cuorato](#), president and CEO of the IVCC.

The new identity is being developed for the Visitor Center as a building and for the corporation as a business entity. It was approved by the National Park Service

Independence Visitor Center logos

The new logo for the Independence Visitor Center building.



The building has had at least four logos since it first opened in 2001. The new brand will continue to be unveiled through the first quarter of 2018, and the new website will launch and the expanded gift shop will open by next spring.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

The website launch will be "the first thorough reveal of the new brand," according to IVCC.

The rebranding and physical expansion is coming at a time when the Visitor Center is becoming more than a building; it's become a destination in and of itself.

Independence National Historical Park is the **largest tourist attraction** in Greater Philadelphia based on visitation, according to the *Philadelphia Business Journal* Book of Lists.

The Visitor Center accounted for 48.8 percent of that visitation to the historical park, the visitors of which generated nearly \$440 million, according to a 2016 annual report by the IVCC.

The Independence Visitor Center in 2016 **hit a visitation milestone** when 2.5 million people came through its doors. It was on pace to exceed that figure by the end of this year, but as of mid-November, the Visitor Center already exceeded 2.5 million visitors, according to new information from IVCC.

The building has become the front line of the hospitality industry of Philadelphia, and the new branding is meant to create a cohesive visitor experience — coincidentally, the expansion project is called the Visitor Experience Improvement Program.

"Branding is almost the same thing as visitor experience," said [Josh Goldblum](#), founder and CEO of Bluecadet. "The space has to be functional, navigable and [you have to] quickly get to things interesting and relevant to you. It's a big part of the rebrand."

A common problem with organizations, including visitor centers, is the visual clutter.

"There was so much information that you couldn't consume it," Goldblum said. "Visitors were getting disoriented. [The new brand] will feel cohesive, with one strong voice and experience."

The typeface used for the new logo, for example, makes it easier to read, which will "result in powerful wayfinding signage on the interior and exterior of the Visitor Center," according to IVCC and Bluecadet.

Bluecadet is also developing a 10-minute orientation video, the outtakes of which will be repurposed and used on the new website and social media promotional efforts.

Independence Visitor Center progress 2017

The Independence Visitor Center is undergoing a multi-year, multimillion dollar renovation.



The Independence Visitor Center and IVCC won't have the same challenges other organizations face. Consumer goods companies, for example, need long-term consistency in their branding — rebrands can sometimes **draw the ire of consumers**.

The visitors at the Visitor Center, however, are "always changing," Bluecadet's Goldblum said, so it wouldn't have that issue for the most part.

"It's trying to make sure we can commit to it and that we can keep it consistent," Goldblum said. "So much depends on strong partners and people who buy into the vision, and so much of our job is creating that vision."

More information on the new branding

The new tagline, "starting here can lead anywhere," is meant to brand the Visitor Center as a one-stop-shop, "fully equipped to take your journey in any direction a visitor chooses."

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

Key to the new logo will be, incidentally, a key, which has "historic significance and conveys that we're the 'key to the city' for visitors," IVCC CEO Cuorato said.

The key is meant to represent:

- The idea that the Visitor Center is the “personal key to Philadelphia” that has access to everything a visitor would be interested in doing while visiting the city.
- Ben Franklin’s kite and key story, including the lightning bolt at the bottom of the key; and
- When the key is turned on its side, the lightning bolt doubles as the crack in the Liberty Bell, a nod to where the Visitor Center is located.

Multiple orientations of the new logo visualize the words “'Visitor Center' with great emphasis,' making the services and role the company serves in Philadelphia "abundantly clear," according to the IVCC.



43 changing rooms and nursing-friendly spaces around Philly, mapped

New moms and dads, this is for you.



MÓNICA MARIE ZORRILLA

MAR 25 2018 · 9:00 A.M.

Updated March 28

Here's another Philly first to make residents proud: In 1997, the city became the first in the United States [to legally protect the right](#) to breastfeed in public.

The progressive stance on parenting and women in the workforce continued a decade later, when the city mandated all job sites [must accommodate](#) breast-pumping. And in 2016, all public bathrooms in Philadelphia were required to have baby changing stations, [including the men's](#).

But that still doesn't mean it's easy to navigate the city as a new parent, where the ability to get out of the house and partake in human interaction can very well depend on whether a stinky diaper can be easily discarded, or if a baby's hunger can be satisfied before they go into full-on *maybe-an-exorcism-would-help?* mode.

It's the little things that go a long way for taking care of your little ones.

Billy Penn is here to help. We dug into local resources like [Wee-Wander](#), [Pennsymoms](#), [La Leche League](#) and the [Philadelphia Department of Public Health](#), scoured the forums and social media, and called around for details.

Our research produced this: A list of 43 parent-friendly changing rooms and nursing-friendly spaces around Center City. Go forth and breastfeed.

[Elmwood Park Zoo](#) 1661 Harding Blvd., Norristown, PA 19401

[The Franklin Institute](#) 222 N. 20th St.

Nursing room on the third floor, near the Sports Center.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

Free Library of Philadelphia *Multiple Locations*

Public baby changing stations abound at Free Library branches.

The Independence Visitor Center *599 Market St.*

Changing stations in both men's and women's restrooms.

The Kimmel Center *300 S. Broad St.*

Offers comfortable, calm seating areas that are just as fabulous for intermission snacking as they are for breastfeeding.

Macy's *1300 Market St.*

The third floor has a Women's Lounge dedicated to nursing and breast pumping. Changing rooms are in every bathroom.

Philadelphia Zoo *3400 W. Girard Ave.*

They've got a brand-new Mamava Lactation Suite in the Rare Animal Conservation Center.

Please Touch Museum *4231 Avenue of the Republic*

Places that are for children need to be able to accommodate their parents. Please Touch does just that.

Reading Terminal Market *51 N. 12th St.*

A tourist trap doesn't sound as enchanting as a place to publicly breastfeed does.

The Shops at Liberty Place *1625 Chestnut St.*

Changing stations in both men's and women's restrooms.

PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

Travel & Tourism

Independence, Valley Forge historical parks have \$439M impact



Visitors to Independence National Historical Park, the 55-acre national park that's home to the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, generated nearly \$400 million in economic impact in 2017.

D. CRUZ FOR VISIT PHILADELPHIA™



By [Kenneth Hilario](#) – Reporter, *Philadelphia Business Journal*
Apr 30, 2018, 1:23pm

The Independence National Historical Park and the Valley Forge National Historical Park pack a nearly \$439 million economic wallop in Greater Philadelphia.

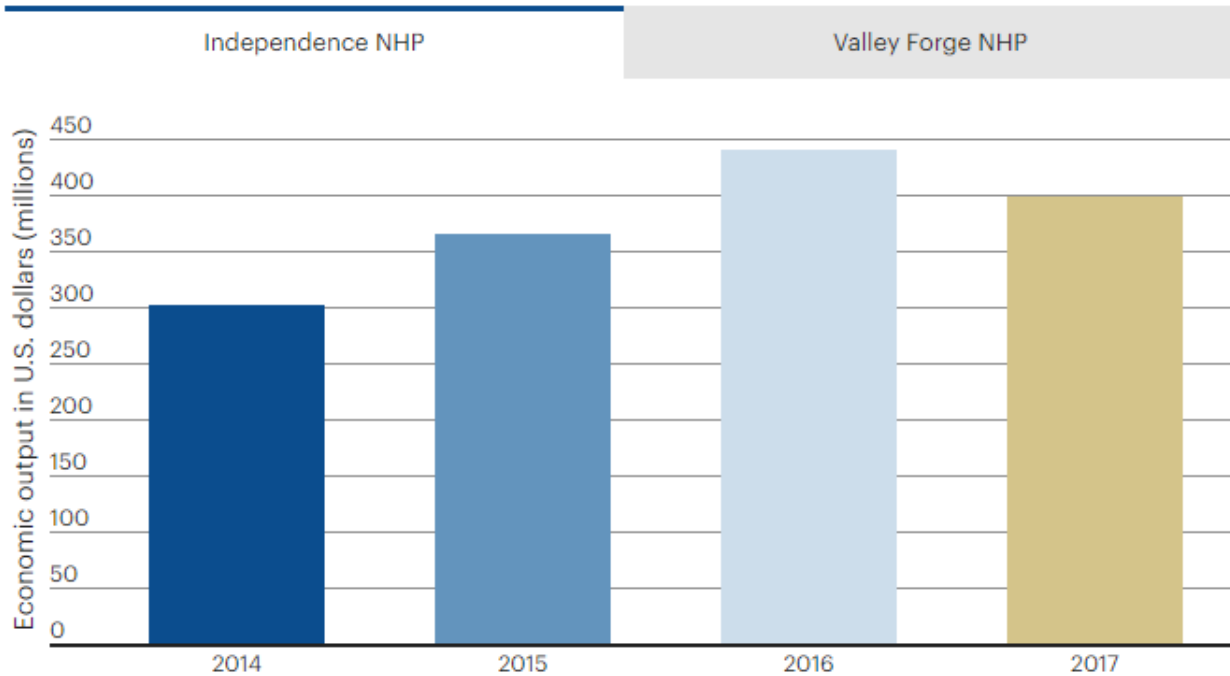
About 2.1 million people in 2017 visited the 3,452-acre Valley Forge National Historical Park, while the 55-acre Independence National Historical Park had about 4.8 million visitors, according to new information by the National Park Service. Valley Forge park visitors spent \$26.8 million, and Independence park visitors spent \$274 million.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

All of that equates to about \$39.9 million and \$399.5 million in economic output, respectively, to Greater Philadelphia, or nearly \$439 million between the two.

GENERATING MILLIONS OVER THE YEARS

The Independence and Valley Forge national historical parks have generated millions of dollars in economic impact.



Source: National Park Service



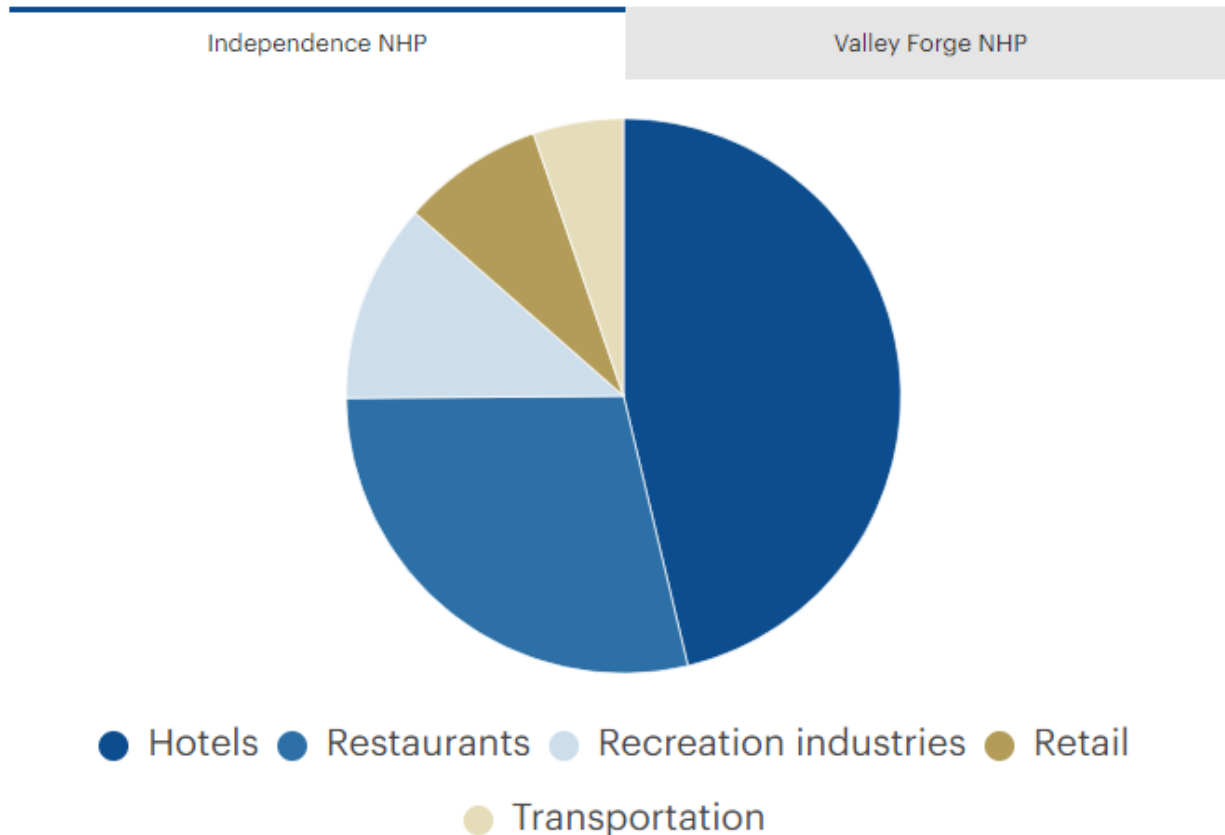
National historical parks — within the vast National Park System — are important landmarks, since they're viewed as an area's gateway; most often then not, they're an out-of-towner's first stop in the city they're visiting, particularly their visitor centers. They're used as part of destination marketing organizations' campaign materials, for example, like the Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board (see below).

The Valley Forge park is the location of the 1777-78 winter encampment of the Continental Army under [George Washington](#); the Independence park is home to landmarks like Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell.

Visitors to Valley Forge National Historical Park in 2017 supported about 426 jobs, while visitors to Independence National Historical Park supported 3,926 jobs.

NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARKS ADD VALUE

The Independence National Historical Park & the Valley Forge National Historical Park add to Greater Philadelphia's GDP. Here are the parks' added value in 2017 in five industries:



**Value added measures the contribution of visitor spending to the gross domestic product of a regional economy. Value added is equal to the difference between the amount an industry sells a product for and the production cost of the product.*

Source: National Park Service

Pennsylvania parks, in total, had 10.3 million recreational visitors, who spent \$478 million and generated \$691 million in economic impact, according to the Park Service. Nationally, about 331 million people visited the National Park System, spending about \$18.2 billion and generating \$35.8 billion in economic impact.

About 61 parks set new records for annual recreation visits, according to the Park Service, and three parks received over 10 million recreation visits.

In 2016, Independence had 5.1 million visitors — a 27-year **milestone** — and Valley Forge had 2.4 million visitors, so 2017 figures are a slight decrease.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

But 2016 was the centennial of the National Park Service, so most parks saw an increase in visitors with numerous promotions encouraging people to visit a Park Service site, according to Independence park spokeswoman [Gina Gilliam](#).

Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell stayed open later, beginning in mid-May because of the Centennial, Gilliam said. And, the park in late June extended hours at Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell.

2016 was also the year the Democratic National Convention was in Philadelphia, and there were more large special-use events and First Amendment activity, Gilliam said.

More is in store for Greater Philadelphia's historical parks, enhancing the experiences at their respective visitor centers, which could encourage more people to visit. Valley Forge officials will start a **\$14.2 million, comprehensive update** to its visitor center that will add interactive elements and other changes meant to engage visitors and encourage them to explore the park.

BANKING & FINANCIA SERVICES

The Independence Visitor Center is undergoing a **\$15 million expansion project**. Construction for the update started in September 2017, and the first funded phases of the project will open this spring and summer.

The newly expanded gift shop will open Memorial Day weekend, and the expanded terrace will open in early summer.

Economists Catherine Cullinane Thomas of the U.S. Geological Survey and Lynne Koontz of the National Park Service conducted the Valley Forge park's peer-reviewed visitor spending analysis.

PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL

[Travel & Tourism](#)

1st phase of \$15M Independence Visitor Center expansion project complete

How adopting a lifestyle retail approach can lead to higher revenue



By [Kenneth Hilario](#) – Reporter, *Philadelphia Business Journal*

May 24, 2018, 1:04pm

The Independence Visitor Center is one phase closer to completing the \$15 million expansion project announced two years ago to enhance the guest experience.

Capping off the first phase of the multimillion-dollar project is the expansion of the visitor center's gift shop, its top revenue generator. Officials adopted a more lifestyle retailer approach, which could potentially lead to higher sales.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

Construction for the multiyear Visitor Experience Improvement Program **began in March 2017** and included the expansion of the second-floor and outdoor terrace, addition of multiple touchscreen and digital displays, and a slew of other enhancements.

The first phase is officially complete; Now the center has a **new logo** and brand assets, and a redesigned website, as well as an expanded, wrap-around second-floor terrace and new public facilities, like a dedicated lactation room.

The first phase is capped off by the completion of the expanded gift shop, which, at 3,450 square feet, is double its initial footprint.

The gift shop, prior to the expansion, was the visitor center's top revenue generator, reeling in an excess of \$1 million a year, according to [James J. Cuorato](#), president and CEO of the Independence Visitor Center Corp.

With a larger space, and more and diverse inventory to fill it, it can only be surmised the visitor center would generate more revenue after the expansion.

It's a "move toward self-sustainability," Cuorato said.

The Independence Visitor Center Corp. took a different approach with the Independence Gift Shop, opting for a lifestyle retail format, with Philadelphia themes throughout the products.

That format includes using mannequins to showcase products. Using mannequins in this way elevates the merchandise visual, said gift shop director [Sean Mellon](#) of Event Network Inc., the company overseeing retail management and operations for Independence Gift Shop.

The customer "visualizes the whole concept," Mellon said, which could potentially encourage them to make additional purchases, since they'll see products working together instead of being disparate items.

Mannequins affect "envisioning and attitude" – that is, if a customer relates to a mannequin, they will envision themselves in the clothes and develop a positive attitude toward the clothing, according to a study by the University of South Carolina.

"[C]onsumers were more likely to purchase if they had a favorable attitude toward the brand, claiming that a consumer's perception of a brand is primary element in the formation of their purchase intention," the study reads.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

People aged 18-34 make up 26 percent of the Independence Visitor Center's demographic, while those aged 35-54 make up 47 percent.

"It was important to consider product that is on trend, but still unique to a visit to Philadelphia," Cuorato said.

"We also considered locals that was something cool and hip to recognize as a Philadelphian or to purchase as a gift," Cuorato said. "We are remaining true to history with Liberty Bells — always a top seller — books and T-shirts that we have always sold in large volumes."



With the gift shop's expanded footprint, the intent was to bring it to "another level" with trends like the "Tavern Story," "Humor," and "Rocky" sections of the shop," Cuorato said.

"Influencing the visitor's purchase decision with new and fun novelty items displayed in large quantities ... will also support to optimize the shop's conversion percentage," Cuorato said.

The expanded square footage and product line will be a significant boost from the previous shop, he said, since visitors will have more room to shop and will be in a "visually and sensory appealing space."

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

The second phase of the expansion project started, and it includes upgrading the two theaters that show free informative films, and the construction of a new desk and exhibit experience for the National Park Service.

Project completion includes the construction of a new Philadelphia-specific information desk; the installation of the "Philadelphia Welcome Wall" — a 42 foot-long immersive digital experience; renovations to the café, public seating and vendor kiosk areas in the north end of the building.

The visitor center corporation submitted an application for a \$1 million Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program, or RACP, grant request for the current round. The corporation also has proposals with several corporate donors for consideration.

Here are a few updates to the gift shop

- Three-dimensional, themed window displays of Philadelphia imagery like "Rocky" and the LOVE statue;
- A "Tavern Story" that highlights the Founding Fathers.
- Apparel and accessories by Philadelphia artist April Melchior;
- Locally made fudge and candy
- and sound-reactive lightning bolts through clouds strung through the rafters



Independence Visitor Center gift shop re-opens



[JOHN MCDEVITT](#)

MAY 24, 2018 - 5:08 PM

PHILADELPHIA (KYW Newsradio) — The newly expanded gift shop inside the visitor's center along Independence Mall has re-opened. There is a lot of Philly-centric merchandise for sale.

A man from Japan was the first to buy a \$299 miniature Rocky Balboa statue. It was created by the same artist who sculpted the original Rocky statue, which stands near the front steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"Stalone fan. I like Movie. Rocky," he said.



In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

There are t-shirts — one reads "YO!" — Liberty Bell hats, LOVE sculpture mugs, locally made candy and colonial style clothing. Several items are exclusive to the gift shop.



John McDevitt-KYW Newsradio

James Cuorato, is the president and CEO of the Independence Visitors Center Corporation.

"In order to expand, we had to move the bathrooms across the hall. We put a terrace on top of the bathrooms, which is gorgeous," he said. "It overlooks the mall."

The work is part of the \$15 million Visitor Experience Improvement Project. Renovations will continue for another year.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage



Action News at 11 p.m.



Sept. 26, 2018 [11:19:56] [0:24]

The Independence Visitor Center is packed with more things for visitors and residents to experience which is why there was a Grand Reveal party at Independence Mall. There were tours of exhibits as well as terrace area. All of the money raised goes toward the experience improvement project.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage



Action News at 10 p.m.



Sept. 26, 2018 [10:26:31] [0:09]

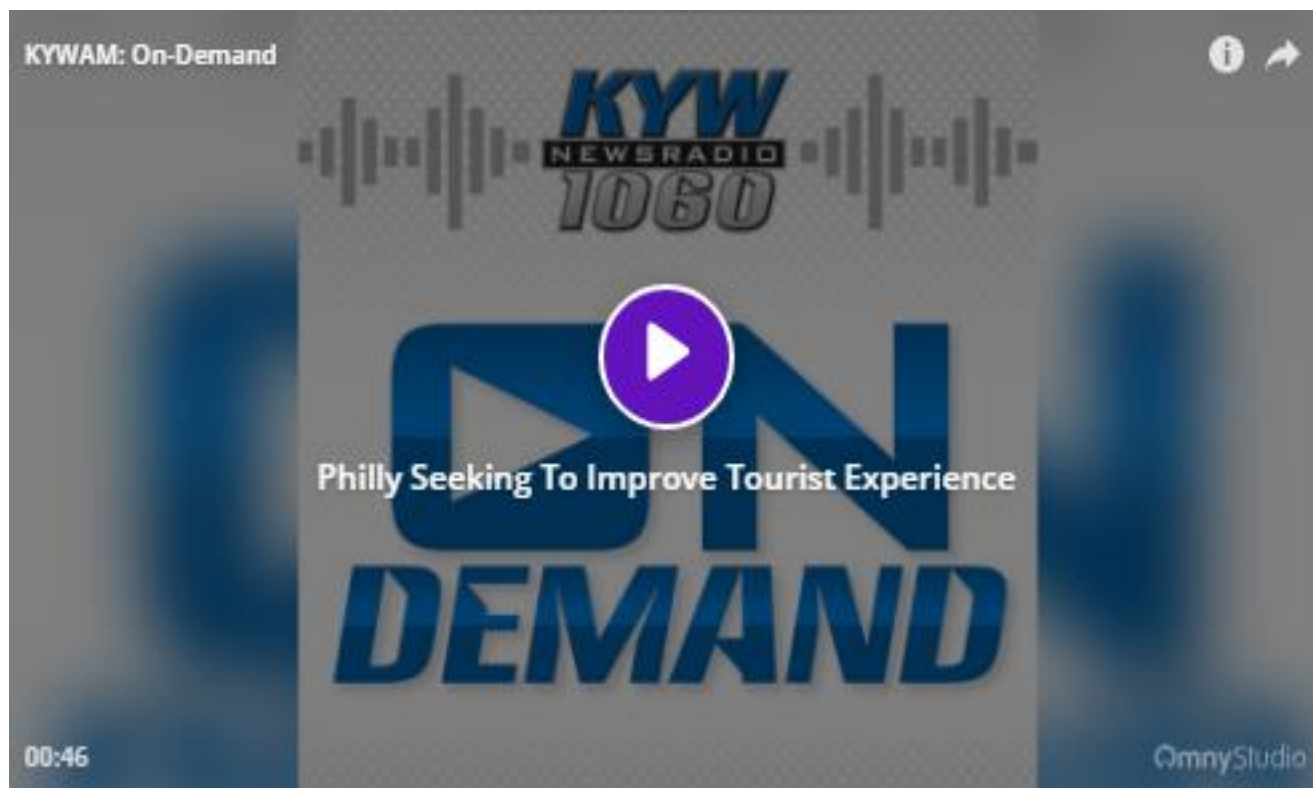
The Independence Visitor's Center has more than ever before. There was a Grand Party there tonight. There was an expanded terrace as well as a welcome film of Philadelphia.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage



September 26, 2018 | 9:37 p.m.

Independence Visitor Center unveils new amenities as part of \$15 million renovation



PHILADELPHIA (KYW Newsradio) — In an effort to improve the tourist experience in Philadelphia, the Independence Visitor Center unveiled the second phase of its \$15 million renovation project, featuring several new visitor amenities.

In the new open theater, the official Welcome Film of Philadelphia shows scenes of some of what makes Philly famous: the Liberty Bell, the Rocky statue, Independence Hall, the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"The idea is to get people excited that they're in Philadelphia," said Independence Visitor Center President and CEO James Cuorato.

And that's all just part of the second phase of improvements. Another revamped theater will show videos produced by the National Park Service. The new bathrooms and enlarged gift shop were completed earlier, and Cuorato said the final round of the project will get underway this fall.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

"Phase three will be a new desk for our visitor services staff, information about the city and the region, and a bank of 18 digital screens that will spring to life as the visitor approaches and give them all the information they need about the city," he said.

The entire Visitor Experience Improvement Project will be finished in the spring.

PHILADELPHIA
BUSINESS JOURNAL

[Travel & Tourism](#)

Independence Visitor Center \$15M renovation project nearly complete with latest milestone (Video)



By [Kenneth Hilario](#) – Reporter, Philadelphia Business Journal
Sep 26, 2018, 12:55pm

The Independence Visitor Center is two-thirds of the way to being a completely new destination, and the milestone is following one of the building's best years for visitation.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

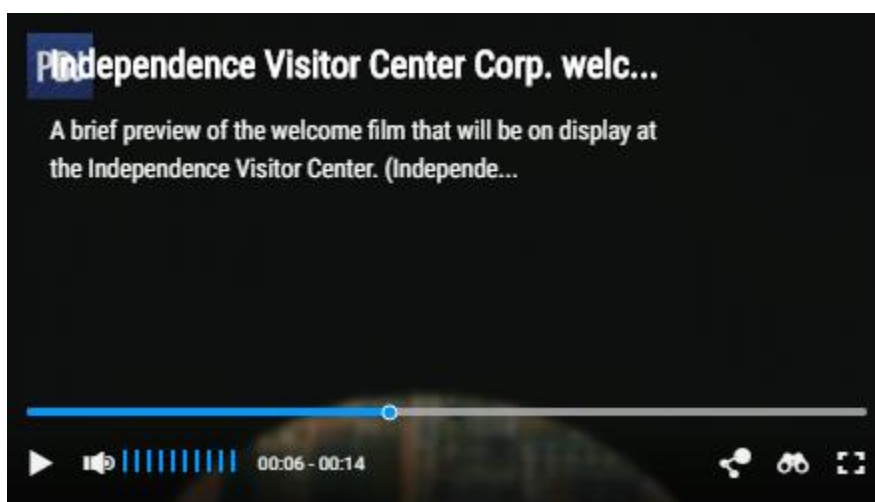
Across from the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, the visitor center has been undergoing a **\$15 million renovation** project dubbed the Visitor Experience Improvement Program.

The Independence Visitor Center Corp., which manages the building, is making headway on the yearslong project, which broke ground in January 2017.

The corporation in May this year **capped off the first phase** with the expansion of its top moneymaker, the gift shop, that now adopts a new format akin to that of a lifestyle retailer.

The center also **adopted a new logo**, a redesigned website and new brand assets, including the tagline, "Starting here can lead anywhere."

The recently completed second phase includes two new theaters and an official, eight-and-a-half minute Welcome Film of Philadelphia developed by Bluecadet, a **growing** Fishtown-based digital agency that's done work with the Museum of the American Revolution in Old City and the National WWII Museum in New Orleans.



Other second-phase changes include new interactive exhibit experiences featuring the Independence National Historical Park; a new location for a dedicated National Park Service ranger desk; and a new, second-floor wrap-around terrace.

The Independence Visitor Center Corp. will host Wednesday a grand reveal party, showcasing the completed two phases.

The final phase planned as part of the renovation project consists of a new dedicated visitor information desk; a new 42-foot long bank of interactive digital screens that will promote regional attractions dubbed the "Welcome Wall;" and a new café concept.

Phase 3 will start this fall, and the entire project should be completed in spring 2019, "just in time for our peak season next year," said James J. Cuorato, president and CEO of the IVCC.

The renovation project is a major undertaking, both from a construction aspect as well as from a financial aspect. Funding came from a number of sources, including Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) grants and dollars from its endowment, which the IVCC board authorized.

In The News: Visitor Experience Improvement Project Press Coverage

The corporation earlier this year submitted an application for a \$1 million RACP, which it received. The \$15 million project will be fully funded.

"With the proceeds from our [grand reveal] event and the recently awarded RACP grant, we will have achieved our goal of \$15 million," Cuorato said.

The Visitor Experience Improvement Program could be seen as a worthwhile investment, especially since visitor centers are typically tourists' first destination in a new city.

The Independence Visitor Center generates between \$200 million and \$400 million in economic impact annually. Since it first opened in 2001, it's had over 38 million people go through its doors.

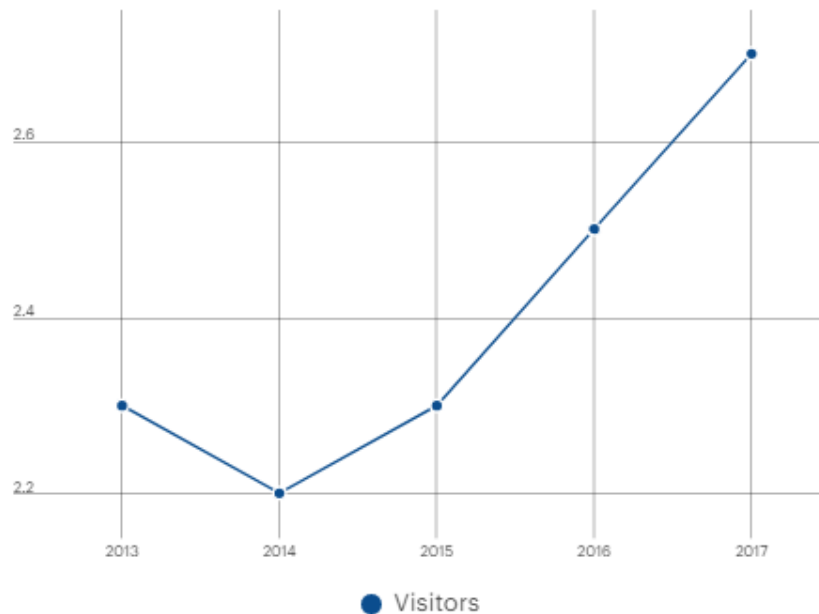
In 2017 alone, more than 2.7 million people visited the center — up 10 percent over 2016 and representing the building's second-highest visitation in its history. It may not come as a surprise, since the building was **already seeing increased figures** with a few months left to spare.

Visitation has grown over 17 percent between 2013 and 2017.

The \$15 million renovation itself is proving to be an economic engine — the increase in ongoing operations due to construction upgrades is supporting \$2 million in expenditures every year; \$22,000 in taxes; and 12 full-time permanent jobs in Pennsylvania. There have also been internal promotions with the Independence Visitor Center Corp.

SOARING VISITATION

The Independence Visitor Center in 2017 nabbed its second-highest visitation figure. Check the the graph to see how visitation's changed since 2013:



Source: Independence Visitor Center Corp.

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