

NEWS

# Attendance is growing at New Bedford Whaling Museum, and so is the building: What's coming



**Frank Mulligan**

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## Key Points

The New Bedford Whaling Museum held an "Open Doors" celebration on June 12.

The museum is celebrating the beginning of its \$31.5 million Welcome and Exhibition Center.

The museum has seen its highest number of first-quarter visits in history, with a large number of visitors from Boston.

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NEW BEDFORD — The opening of the [New Bedford Whaling Museum's](#) new \$31.5 million Welcome and Exhibition Center was heartily welcomed during an "Open Doors" celebration.

Plans call for completion of the 20,000-square-foot center in fall 2026. It will include a 6,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art gallery level that will host exhibitions co-curated with major institutions.

[The museum](#) purchased the building at 11 William St. to serve as the site, which will be united with the current campus by a new plaza.

**Theater, museum, apartments:** [How historic New Bedford buildings have been preserved](#)

## First exhibition is already lined up

Amanda McMullen, New Bedford Whaling Museum president and CEO, said during the June 12 event that the first exhibition is already booked, and it's a major institution indeed: the Smithsonian.

The museum's momentum is already apparent, she said, as the New Bedford anchor institution celebrates the new center's addition.

McMullen said [visits in the first five months of 2025 were the highest](#) in the organization's 120-year-plus history.

## More Boston visitors since South Coast Rail opened

Adult ticket sales are 51% ahead of pre-pandemic sales, and [there are more Boston visitors since the MBTA opened its South Coast Rail service](#).

“Our attendance from Boston ZIP codes during the same period of time since March 24, when it opened, is up 92%,” McMullen said. “The SouthCoast community rail is working.”

McMullen added, “We are here first and foremost for education, discovery and learning. Our students served this year are up 15%.”

**Visiting New Bedford:** [New Bedford Whaling Museum visits are soaring. MBTA commuter rail may be a factor.](#)

## Museum's front entrance to be transformed

She said the museum received a \$500,000 federal appropriation in 2024 through the efforts of Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Sen. Ed Markey, and U.S. Rep. Bill Keating.

“That will help transform our existing front entrance when we open our new space and expand our science education around the environment.”

**Mass Adventures:** [A New Bedford experience via South Coast Rail. Here's what to do](#)

McMullen said, “Our primary focus is always building pride of place. New Bedford is an extraordinary city. The SouthCoast is an amazing region. And we were built for advancing that narrative. That was what this institution was founded to do.”

Mayor Jon Mitchell said the city put \$3 million into the project through ARPA funds.

Mitchell, who worked as a custodian at the museum two summers while a high school student, said, “I’ve always had a huge affection for the place but also an appreciation of its role in the region as the repository in effect of its history in a place that is so interwoven with its identity.”

## There are many benefits to the expansion

There are many benefits to the museum’s expansion, Mitchell said.

“It’s going to be a shot in the arm for the downtown. It’s going to add foot traffic, increase stays in our hotels and patrons in our restaurants and the volume of sales in our shops,” Mitchell said.

The economic benefit will be augmented by the aesthetic benefit of the development of “an architecturally distinct building by a really first-rate group of architects.”

Most important, he said, is the project’s reflection upon the city.

“The museum is a shrine to New Bedford in some respects. It’s an educational institution, to be sure. It’s an economic anchor. But in many ways, it represents New Bedford. When people think about coming to New Bedford, one of their immediate thoughts is coming to the Whaling Museum.”

He added, “Cities aren’t strong if their institutions aren’t strong.”

## Telling the story of everyone in the community

State Rep. Tony Cabral, D-New Bedford, said the museum was an “anchor institution in the community. Its strength represents the strength of the city and the region itself and that’s because of the people involved.”

Cabral said it became better and stronger “the day that it decided to tell the story of everyone in this community.”

Whaling expeditions setting out from New Bedford on years-long voyages had very little crew to start, he said.

They picked up crew members on stops at the Azores and Cape Verde, he said.

Many years ago, Cabral said, the museum decided to be inclusive and tell the story of that crew, and how by the end of the whaling days those former crew members were captains and ship owners.

Large-scale projects like this need partnerships, Cabral said. The state also provided money in the \$3 million range, maybe a little more, he said.

## Changing the aesthetics of downtown

State Rep. Chris Hendricks, D-New Bedford, said, “We’re really fortunate to have a history here. I just want to say thank you to everyone involved in this expansion, this whole renovation.”

Ward 4 City Councilor Derek Baptiste said the Welcome and Exhibition Center will “change the aesthetics of downtown in a positive way.”

He added, “This can be the epicenter of the art and culture district. And it can help other people. It can help other businesses. It can help other artists.”

[Outgoing chair of the Museum’s Board of Trustees Tony Sapienza](#) said, “What a wonderful day to be in New Bedford. There are so many great things happening here — wind, rail, art, music, new housing and some new restaurants, as well. I believe in New Bedford and in this museum.”

## Funding close but more needed

New Board Chair R. Davis Webb said, “The future is bright. We’re excited about the future.”

Webb said they’ve [raised \\$25.5 million to date](#), or over two-thirds of what’s needed. That includes \$3 million as an endowment to fund center operations for generations to come.

He said they had also received a \$2.5 million challenge grant funded by two generous foundations “that can carry us to the next steps.”

He and his wife personally increased their donation by over 20%, he added.

McMullen said the project really got started in November 2023 when City Hall provided the three different grants of \$3 million through ARPA. The capital campaign committee was then formed, and its first meeting was January 2024. Since that time the \$25.5 million has been raised, she said.