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## Foundation gets a front door

*\$15M Gates visitor center gives public a new glimpse of philanthropy's First Family*

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Early discussions about a visitor center for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation started with the suggestion of a small kiosk to introduce the largest foundation in the world and Seattle's latest landmark to the public.

That kiosk idea turned into the innovative, \$15 million museum-like center that opens at the Gates Foundation campus Feb. 4.

"It really evolved over time," said Julie Humling, a former foundation employee who helped select the new campus' location. "The idea actually came from Bill (Gates) Sr., and when we were doing our early interviews with the executive staff, he expressed a desire to have something that would represent the work of the foundation to the community."

That early seed of an idea for a visitor's kiosk years ago gradually evolved, eventually culminating in a dynamic and interactive gallery along Fifth Avenue in a separate building on the foundation's \$500 million headquarters campus.

The foundation, for all its good works, has long dealt with occasional criticism from grantees, the press and public that it lacked openness and accountability.

Visitors also asked the Gates Foundation what individuals could do to help. Initially, the Gates Foundation was unprepared to answer that question. But the foundation believes the new visitor center fulfills that need, Melinda Gates said.

Now, resting in the shadow of the Space Needle, the new visitor center offers an opportunity for the foundation to communicate directly about its work in the U.S. and abroad, along with the motives, efforts and issues it champions.

The 11,000-square-foot center opens its doors Feb. 4 to an interactive, museum-like space. Admission is free, and the center will be open from 10 a.m. to



BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO | Marcus R. Donner

**FAMILY PROJECT:** Bill Gates, Melinda French Gates and William H. Gates Sr. speak to the international media in the Voices gallery at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation visitor center. The Voices gallery has photos of people who work for the foundation, people who partner with the foundation and people who are served by the foundation.

chairs had that in their background," said Diane Andolsek, project manager of the visitor center's development. "That (philanthropy) wasn't sort of a new development, so we do talk a little bit about their history and how they decided to create a foundation."

When the foundation responded to rapid growth by breaking ground on the new campus in 2008, leaders were aware they were building a landmark. The campus' opening in 2011 was critical step toward presenting a more open appearance at the foundation.

funding alternative energy projects. Bill Gates explains in a short video that the foundation believes that issue is best addressed in the private sector, but notes that the foundation does take on challenges like famine and drought that can be impacted by the changing climate.

The center also takes the chance to address challenges to the foundation's work on genetically modified seeds for small farmers and to address skepticism about vaccines, which are a major focus area for the foundation.

helped Melinda Gates find the location for the new campus. "So you see the metamorphosis of that time and now. The opening of the visitors center is a cherry on top."

Now leadership is also using the visitor center to start a two-way conversation with the public. For example, one section encourages visitors to write down what they would do if they could start their own foundation — their words are quickly projected up on a screen to be viewed by all passersby. Other areas encourage feedback and critical thinking about global problems.

"We pay attention to what gets entered," Melinda Gates said.

"I don't think they ever attempted to be not transparent," Kinzer said. "They were just focused on their work and to some degree concerned about security."

The foundation has also been working to find the best way to balance the global curiosity about its leaders, Bill and Melinda Gates, with the desire to promote issues and partnerships. Building the new campus signaled that the organization was ready for a higher profile than in the past.

And the visitor center was the next step.

"The idea, Andolsek said, "is that the foundation is really just people, just regular people,"

**"Part of our learning has to be to hear outside voices."**

MELINDA GATES

BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, year-round.

The center is a five-room gallery that includes a room focused on the Gates family's and foundation's evolution. It offers a glimpse of the early familial emphasis on philanthropy that both Bill and Melinda experienced while growing up.

"There was, at some point in the concept development, a realization that people want to understand the family's philosophy around philanthropy, and the fact that as children, both the co-

"They said, 'We're now ready to essentially introduce ourselves to the community, and let's do that,'" Kinzer said.

The visitor center doesn't shy away from the criticism about transparency. A section is devoted to the fact that "Sometimes people disagree with our approach." Bill and Melinda Gates, and foundation CEO Jeff Raikes, are featured in videos in the section talking about some of the more controversial approaches they've taken.

For example, the foundation is not

"Part of our learning has to be to hear outside voices," Melinda Gates told people touring the center.

It's a significant, if carefully executed, shift for a foundation that has built a thick layer of bureaucracy around any interaction with the public.

"When we first started working with the foundation they were very, very private, in nondescript buildings, and they had not attempted in any way to become a public entity or talk to the public," said Craig Kinzer, the principal at Kinzer Real Estate Services who

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