

Funding fuels Porcupine project

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The Bayfront Maritime Center and Big Ideas Learning recently announced a partnership during a news conference at the Maritime Center's boat room, 40 Holland St., where work on the topsail schooner Porcupine is taking place.



Matt Totzke – Larsen Texts Inc./Big Ideas Learning CEO, and Rich Eisenberg – BMC Director, aboard Porcupine

Big Ideas Learning has big programming plans for ‘The School Ship for Presque Isle Bay’

Bayfront Maritime Center officials received a huge funding boost recently when Millcreek Township-based Big Ideas Learning, a subsidiary of Larson Texts Inc., pledged \$100,000 over the next six years toward the nonprofit's ongoing construction of the schooner Porcupine.

The project's estimated cost is \$810,000. Bayfront Maritime officials have raised more than \$400,000 and hope that the vessel, earmarked primarily as a sailing science, technology, engineering and math classroom for area students, could set sail as early as this coming spring.

Funding from Big Ideas Learning will be used toward construction of the historical representation of a War of 1812 square topsail schooner, and to create maritime-themed S.T.E.M. programming and curriculum aboard the vessel.

Matthew Totzke, CEO of Larson Texts, presented a \$25,000 check to the center on Aug. 4. His company will donate another \$25,000 to the Maritime Center in 2018, and \$10,000 each year from 2019 through 2023.

"The students will be on the ship every year and it's going to be an amazing resource for the local students," Totzke said. "We're excited about the project and the difference it can make for the Erie students and community. This is absolutely our largest commitment ever."

The vessel will have the capability to host 30 students and teachers, or passengers, on day-sail education program ventures, and a maximum 12 students for overnight and multiday programs.

"The funding is huge, but also their (Big Ideas Learning) skill at developing programming and developing curriculum, and getting those materials created and made in an engaging, thoughtful way that fits what we're doing here," said Maritime Center Executive Director Richard Eisenberg. "That's a huge gift, too. We're so proud and pleased that Big Ideas Learning saw the value in this and realized that we're a similar mission for the kids."

The partnership between the Maritime Center and Big Ideas Learning will "meld middle and high school mathematics with experiential hands-on learning aboard the schooner Porcupine," officials said.

Once the vessel is sail-ready, Eisenberg said Porcupine students and participants will be schooled in the bay's ecology and water quality, navigation, meteorology and shipwreck science, and will explore decades of Erie's maritime history.

"I'd like to be sailing next spring," he said. "That's the goal. That's a real aggressive goal. I'm not holding my breath. If fundraising goes on track and stays good, and we can add some more people that we need to this project, that will help speed it up. It's all dependent on fundraising like it was from the start."

Veteran shipwrights and staff have been working since spring 2015 on transforming a donated 40-foot-long fiberglass hull into the Porcupine's envisioned role.

The twin-masted vessel is 43 feet long on its deck and 15 feet 2 inches at its maximum width on deck.

Eisenberg said the \$400,000-plus his nonprofit has raised does not include countless services and items donated toward the project.

"We've been blessed by the volunteer efforts of all sorts of amazing people who have helped out — talented, skillful people who have jumped in, rolled up their sleeves and helped us out," Eisenberg said. "If we had to pay them all what they earned and deserved, it's a much, much more expensive project. We've been blessed with the core and the quality of volunteers who have come to help this out."

A \$5,000 donation from the PNC Foundation to the Bayfront Maritime Center in July was earmarked for work on the Porcupine's propulsion system. Crews are now working on mechanics of the interior.

"You can't rush this," Eisenberg said. "Huge projects take a little bit longer than anyone expects. There's bumps in the road. We're right on track and committed to making this happen."

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Millcreek's Big Ideas Learning partners with the Bayfront Maritime Center on the estimated \$810,000 shipbuilding and education project.

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[Big Ideas Learning](#), a subsidiary of Millcreek Township-based [Larson Texts Inc.](#), has pledged \$100,000 over the next six years to help the Bayfront Maritime Center complete construction of its Porcupine schooner project and to provide maritime-themed math curriculum for onboard programming.

Rich Eisenberg, executive director of the Maritime Center, and Larson Texts CEO Matthew Totzke announced the partnership Friday morning during a news conference inside the Maritime Center's boat room at 40 Holland St., where work on the Porcupine is ongoing.

When completed, the Porcupine, a historical representation of a War of 1812 square topsail schooner, will be known as The School Ship for Presque Isle Bay.'

Big Ideas Learning presented Eisenberg with a \$25,000 check. Totzke said his company will donate an additional \$25,000 to the Maritime Center in 2018, and continue its support with yearly donations of \$10,000 from 2019 through 2023.

"In addition to the financial support, one of the things that was important to us was also to help with developing the curriculum because that's our expertise and something we thought we could bring," Totzke said. "A lot of people can write the check, but not everyone can help make the programming as high quality as Rich wants it to be."

Eisenberg said Maritime Center officials have raised more than \$400,000 for the project but need additional funding to cover the project's estimated \$810,000 cost.

"This donation helps us a lot," Eisenberg said. "We're still fundraising, we still need more to finish this. We'd like to be sailing in the spring of 2018. That's an aggressive schedule, and I'm making no promises, but that's what we're shooting for. If we can raise enough money, that can happen. It's aggressive."

Staff and veteran shipwrights have been working since the spring of 2015 to transform a donated 40-foot fiberglass hull into the Porcupine's envisioned primary role as a regional science, technology, engineering and math classroom for area students.

That science and technology vision is incorporated into its composition: fiberglass hull, steel keel and a wooden deck, wooden masts and mostly wooden interior.

"Rich and I probably started talking at the beginning of the year, and from the beginning we realized we have similar missions, where we're really focused on the student, every student can learn, and they can learn through applying their knowledge through real world skills," Totzke said.

Larson Texts and Big Ideas Learning have produced math textbooks for students in sixth grade through college calculus for nearly four decades. They are used each year by about 5 million students.

The company was founded in 1978 by then-Penn State Behrend math professor Ron Larson and has been based since 2000 at its two-story, 25,000-square-foot facility, the former Belle Valley Elementary School, at 1762 Norcross Road.

Construction started in June on a \$5 million project that will add a new four-story addition and additional 32,000 square feet to Larson Texts' existing structure.

"In talking with Rich, I got really excited about the possibility of us being involved in a very real way in the Erie community with our expertise in education and with a partner that shares a lot of our ideas," Totzke said. "It was a no-brainer."

Friday's announcement comes on the heels of a recent \$5,000 donation to the Maritime Center from the PNC Foundation to support construction.

Besides its primary function as a floating classroom offering half-day or full-day sails for schoolchildren, the Porcupine also will conduct overnight programs, public sails, private charters and special programming.

The twin-masted Porcupine will be 43 feet in length on its deck and a maximum 15 feet 2 inches wide. Its sparred length, from the bowsprit to the back of its main boom, is 62 feet. The vessel's draft is 5 feet 4 inches.

A 7,800-pound keel was welded to the hull in the past year.

Shipwrights have changed the shape of the Porcupine's bow, stem and transom, installed a rudder, and have raised the freeboard, giving the vessel more height above the waterline as well as additional internal room and more deck space.

The original gunboat Porcupine was built under the direction of Daniel Dobbins in the spring of 1813 near the foot of present-day Sassafras Street. The Porcupine fought in the Battle of Lake Erie near Put-in-Bay, Ohio, in September 1813.

Kathy Palmerton, of Ravenna, Ohio, and her now late husband, Keith Palmerton, donated the Porcupine's 40-foot fiberglass hull in September 2014 after learning about the center and its work with inner-city and underserved children.

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L-R: Rich Eisenberg-BMC Director, Dennis Williams-BMC Board Secretary, Ken Phillips-*Porcupine* Volunteer, Matt Totzke- CEO at Larson Texts, Sue Dombrowski- VP Finance and HR Larson Texts, Doug Boucher-BMC Board President