Blacksburg and Roanoke kick off statewide Virginia Science Festival

By Mike Allen mike.allen@roanoke.com 981-3236

Southwest Virginia already has a reputation for festivals celebrating everything from ethnic diversity (and cuisine) to peaches, chili, strawberries and beer.

Now, add to that list the wonders of science and technology, which will be the focus of what could become the biggest festival of all.

Organized by the Science Museum of Western Virginia in collaboration with Virginia Tech, the first ever Virginia Science Festival will bring hundreds of science-related exhibitions and demonstrations to the Roanoke and New River valleys. The festival starts Saturday and continues through Oct. 11. The overwhelming majority of the events are free, and all are meant to combine science education with fun family activities.

"To say that this is terrific for the region is an understatement," said Ben Knapp, director of the Institute for Creativity, Arts, and Technology at Virginia Tech. "It's going to be a blast."

The festival has two launch sites, spaced a week apart. On Saturday at Virginia Tech, the Moss Arts Center and the campus drill field will fill up with demo booths, many run by the various university departments, which will get a chance to show off their scientific mojo to a general audience.

On Oct. 11, the science booths will take over downtown Roanoke, setting up a string of exhibitions from the Taubman Museum of Art to the Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute. Organizers are calling this strand of exhibits "the S.T.E.A.M. Trail." The acronym stands for science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics, said Science Museum of Western Virginia Executive Director Jim Rollings.

Trolleys will be running that day to take festivalgoers from Elmwood Park or Market Square to the school of medicine and back.

The number and variety of events is so potentially overwhelming that organizers had an interactive map created that can be accessed through the smartphone app FreshAR. The app can be downloaded at playfreshar.com/gp/app.

Weekday events will take place during the festival period, too. The Roanoke Valley Astronomical Society will hold a moon viewing Monday on the Center in the Square rooftop, and another session of star-gazing will take place Tuesday at Virginia Western Community College.

At 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, there will be a science-related
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Virginia Science Festival highlights
Both days of the festival will feature scores of events, exhibitions and demonstrations. For a complete schedule, visit http://virginiasciencefestival.org

Inflatable NASA space launching system and Orion space capsule
Saturday, Virginia Tech drill field; Oct. 11, Elmwood Park, Roanoke

Representatives from NASA Langley Research Center in Virginia will bring full-scale inflatable models to both Blacksburg and Roanoke. Even though it's smaller in scale than the real thing, the model booster rocket will temporarily give the Virginia Museum of Transportation's model rocket some altitude competition. A companion model replicates the newly built Orion space capsule meant for astronauts on deep space missions. NASA has scheduled an unmanned test flight for an Orion capsule in December. The NASA showcase also includes a 30-foot inflatable Earth Dome and a display demonstrating what it's like to work in space.

WDBJ WeatherFest
Saturday, Virginia Tech drill field; Oct. 11, Market Square, Roanoke

The news station and festival sponsor will have its meteorologists available for meet-and-greets, as well as a green screen for those who want to give weather forecasting a whirl. The station will have weather-related vehicles on display, such as snow plows, and also a tornado simulator.

Salt Marsh Suite
Saturday, Moss Arts Center, Virginia Tech

This interactive installation was created by a team of artists and researchers using video footage of life in a salt marsh from underwater, at water level and in the air. It was originally exhibited in April using the projection technology inside "the Cube," the four-story black-box theater inside Moss Arts Center. "Salt Marsh Suite" incorporates music and even dance into its demonstration of what a crab's eye view of the world would be like.

Robot Parade
Saturday: Moss Arts Center, Virginia Tech

A student group known as the Tuxedo Pandas, part of the Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council, will conduct a parade of tabletop-sized robots. Adults and children who are robotically inclined can bring their own fully autonomous mechanical bots to be part of the parade. Organizers will also make Lego sets available for those who want to build a robot on the spot.

Art & Science
Oct. 11, Taubman Museum of Art

The museum's contribution to the festival includes a gathering, called "STEM Tavern," at Soaring Ridge Craft Brewers on Shenandoah Avenue Northwest in Roanoke. The guest speaker will be Mike Friedlander, director of the Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute, and every beer sold will benefit the science museum.

"We intend for that to be a monthly program," Rollings said.

The science museum wasn't originally planning to be the epicenter of a statewide event.

"Our original vision was to put on a festival here locally," said science museum director of development and marketing Michael Hemphill.

The Science Festival Alliance in Cambridge, Massachusetts, awarded the museum a $10,000 matching fund grant in 2013, which provided the seed money. Representatives for the offices of Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine were included in the planning process and saw potential for something bigger, museum officials said. Kaine and Warner are the festival's honorary co-chairmen.

Exhibitors and sponsors have embraced the idea, science museum officials said. Appalachian Power Co. pledged $25,000 early on. The museum itself will be open free of charge Oct. 11 thanks to a sponsorship by WDBJ (Channel 7).

On the days between the Blacksburg and Roanoke technological hometowns, events bearing the Virginia Science Festival brand will take place in other cities, including Abingdon, Bedford, Lynchburg, Martinsville and Danville.

Other Virginia communities that have science centers jumped on board quickly, Rollings said, and in communities that don't have one, libraries stepped forward to join in with events held under the festival's brand.

"We believe as we grow next year and expand around the state that libraries might serve a really important role," Rollings said.

Last month, the festival received a $25,000 matching grant from the Virginia Tourism Corp. which Hemphill said will help the science museum publicize next year's festival. The festival will again be centered in the Roanoke and New River valleys, but organizers hope to see a growth in events statewide.

A successful first year could help bring in even more partners and sponsors, Rollings said.

The museum's costs for the festival have come to about $60,000. However, the equivalent amount of in-kind donations from organizations volunteering to take part is "just about immeasurable," Rollings said.

In Blacksburg, the cost to the university to create exhibits has been minimal, Knapp said.

"It's just demonstrating research science and engineering that's already happening at Virginia Tech."

While Virginia isn't the first state to adopt a statewide science festival, they're still not common nationwide, Rollings said.

"We're kind of in a leadership position."
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