

# Rock Hall schedules Oct. 5 groundbreaking for \$135 million-plus expansion as precursor to city's lakefront makeover

By Steven Litt, Cleveland.com

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To paraphrase the 2021 campaign slogan of Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame isn't waiting.

On Bibb's watch, the city is planning an ambitious [downtown lakefront makeover](#) designed in part to reduce the relative isolation of North Coast Harbor and the Rock Hall, one of the city's biggest attractions.

But the Rock Hall isn't waiting for the city's plans to gel. The 28-year-old museum, which attracts roughly half a million visitors and says it contributes \$250 million in [economic impact annually](#), said Tuesday that it will hold a ceremonial groundbreaking on October 5 for a sizable new expansion that will increase its footprint by a third.

The museum also said it has raised \$135 million for the project — far more than the \$100 million target it previously announced. Roughly \$9.5 million, or 7%, has come from the State of Ohio. The remainder has been donated by private sources including the American Electric Power Foundation, Aramark, Baker Hostetler, and Patty and Jay Baker.

(The heavily private support for the expansion contrasts with the original funding for the Rock Hall, of which roughly \$65 million was raised from public sources. Some \$39 million came in the form of revenue bonds from the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority, backed by Cuyahoga County bed tax receipts. The \$92 million cost of the original building in 1995 translates to \$187 million in 2023 dollars).

Greg Harris, the museum's [president and CEO since late 2012](#), said in an interview with Cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer that the money raised so far will cover most of the project's cost, but he doesn't want to announce the total figure until construction bids are received, and the Rock Hall has a guaranteed maximum price.

Site work will begin by November, followed by the excavation of vertical shafts for caissons extending more than 100 feet deep through layers of lakefront landfill. The caissons will support a 50,000-square-foot expansion designed by New York-based [PAU, the Practice for Architecture and Urbanism](#).

Harris said he's excited about the city's emerging plans for waterfront improvements, including a "land bridge" or lakefront connector, that will extend north from the downtown Mall over the Ohio 2 Shoreway and lakefront rail lines to create a pedestrian- and bike-friendly route to attractions around North Coast Harbor.

But while the city's plans are still evolving, "this project is happening," Harris said of the Rock Hall expansion. "It's exciting to me that the museum is controlling its destiny by leading this expansion project right at the lakefront."

## **A deeper look**

The look of the Rock Hall's project is no secret. Early to mid-stage plans have been unveiled in a step-by-step review process overseen by the city's planning commission during the past year.

The design, led by PAU founder and creative director, architect [Vishaan Chakrabarti](#), calls for a new wing extending west from the iconic glass pyramid of the Rock Hall's 1995 building, [designed by I.M. Pei](#), one of America's greatest 20th-century architects. The new wing, whose shapes and forms echo those of Pei's original building, will be sheltered under a triangular roof thrusting down toward the base of the Pei pyramid in a gesture that shows reverence and irreverence as Harris and Chakrabarti have stated.

The city's review process focused mainly on the expansion's impact on public spaces around North Coast Harbor and on the exterior of the Rock Hall's original building, located on the northwest corner of Erieside Avenue and the East Ninth Street pier.

In conjunction with the Rock Hall's new announcements, Harris and Chakrabarti provided a deeper advance look at the project, including new interior renderings showing how the expansion will add to the Rock Hall's impact and enhance the visitor's experience.

## **More room for exhibits, events**

The project will expand the Rock Hall's Main Exhibit Hall, located below its front entry plaza, by 41.4% from 27,575 square feet to 38,991 square feet. The museum will grow overall from 155,000 square feet to 205,000 square feet.

The new room for exhibits will enable the Rock Hall to host and originate larger traveling exhibitions than it can currently. Harris said that no single exhibit space in the existing layout today is larger than 2,000 to 3,000 square feet.

Some of the new space for exhibits will be created by relocating the Rock Hall's administrative offices, now located mainly in below-ground spaces on the east side of the Pei building next to the Main Exhibit Hall.

The offices will move to 6,000 square feet of space in a new, drum-shaped, granite-enclosed structure at the outer corner of the new wing next to Erieside Avenue.

The other outside corner of the new wing, located closer to the North Coast Harbor promenade, will be supported by a new structure shaped like a conical ellipse, enclosed in precast concrete panels. The structure will house a new, 6,246-square-foot multipurpose space designed to host concerts and events.

The new event space will include a 788-square-foot stage platform and a 1,831-square-foot mezzanine. It will accommodate standing room for 1,400 people, 950 people in movable seats, and 450 seated at tables.

The Rock Hall hosted 234 events in 2022 ranging from luncheons and receptions to full-venue corporate events. It also held 100 live music events including broadcasts from its own radio station. But Harris said the Pei building has limited the possibilities to meet rising demand for events.

"We really squeeze them into this pyramid now," he said.

## **Better flow**

Perhaps most importantly for everyday visitors, the Rock Hall will move its new main entrance from the base of the Pei pyramid to a new set of doors close to a new drop-off zone at Erieside Avenue.

The new entry will be far more accessible and hospitable than the existing one, which requires visitors to traverse a plaza shaped like a record on a turntable that offers no shelter from winter winds.

Inside the new entry, visitors will be greeted by a vista looking north toward North Coast Harbor, the Steamship William G. Mather and Lake Erie through a two-story glass façade.

A grand staircase resembling an amphitheater will descend 20 feet from the entry plaza level into the 14,000-square-foot space facing the lakefront promenade around

the harbor. An elevator will also be available. Admission ticketing will take place at the lakeside level, just outside the Main Exhibit Hall.

Much of the time, the new double-height entrance lobby will function as a year-round free space for public enjoyment.

“We’re hoping it’s a space where people just want to hang out and look at the lake and enjoy a pop-up performance,” Chakrabarti said.

Visitors could also turn right at the new main entrance and walk through a glassy new passageway embracing the base of the western side of the Pei pyramid.

As Chakrabarti put it, the Pei pyramid will appear to crash down through the narrow triangular tip of the new wing where the old and new structures intersect.

The Rock Hall café and shop will remain in the free, non-ticketed spaces they now occupy at the main plaza level of the Pei pyramid.

The design, with its energetic clash of thrusting geometric shapes, is intended to evoke the energy of rock and roll, while also giving visitors more freedom to choose how to flow through the museum in comparison to the more circumscribed route required by Pei’s original design.

## **Open through construction**

Harris emphasized that the Rock Hall will be open throughout the entire construction period, from this fall to late 2025 or early 2026.

Construction will largely not affect the existing building, except for the relocation of the museum’s administrative offices and the removal of a large escalator rising from the lobby outside the Main Exhibit Hall to the museum’s second floor. The Rock Hall has decided that the escalator, which takes up a good deal of floor space, is confusing and superfluous.

Outdoor concerts, which have become a fixture on the summer calendar in recent years, will continue, although locations may shift around the Rock Hall’s front entry plaza.

As the Rock Hall announced earlier this year, Hall of Fame inductions will take place in Cleveland at Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse, alternating every other year starting in 2024 with locations including New York and Los Angeles.

Harris said the expanded museum will be better equipped to host special events surrounding the inductions, including the traditional induction eve celebration. But the expansion is not, strictly speaking, related to the inductions, he said.

Instead, it's a capstone to a series of "Museum 2.0" revisions to the Rock Hall that began in 2016 with improvements to the institution's main entry plaza that included an outdoor stage and the "Long Live Rock" sign spelled out on monumental red letters.

## **Fixing flaws**

The Pei building is revered as one of his most recognizable works, but even its admirers admit it has flaws.

As Chakrabarti said, "as much as I honor Pei, the building has functional problems."

Harris said the expansion was designed "against the backdrop of having lived in this space for 28 years. We know what things can be improved. We've learned how visitors respond. We've also learned about what spaces that we need."

Originally designed for a site overlooking the Cuyahoga River behind Tower City Center, the Rock Hall was located on the lakefront after the project sponsors failed to reach an agreement on the location with Forest City Enterprises.

The Pei pyramid was intended originally to face upward toward the Terminal Tower, a rambunctious architectural David facing off with a tradition-bound Goliath. As a result of the move, the museum faces southeast, away from the downtown skyline, and turns its back to Lake Erie.

Reaching the main exhibit area below the front plaza means navigating a confusing circulation pattern that requires a right-hook turn inside the lobby and a ride down an escalator. From there on up, the Rock Hall's exhibit floors shrink as they rise, given the building's pyramidal shape.

Since 2016, Harris and his staff have worked to squeeze every ounce of functionality out of the existing building. They redesigned the museum's Hall of Fame exhibit, and created a popular, interactive "Garage" jamming area and studio where visitors can try out their licks on drums, keyboards and guitars. And they installed an immersive, spotlight-spangled greatest-hits film about Rock Hall inductions, created by the late filmmaker Jonathan Demme.

The reconfigured Rock Hall downplays the clean, white, purist composition of clashing geometric forms envisioned by Pei. Many of the original white interior

surfaces inside have been painted black to evoke the mood of a music club or a rock concert stage. Graphics in red and gold have been splashed across surfaces.

In a sense, the throbbing energy of the Rock Hall's main exhibit area has extended up through the building. The improvements have maxed out the Rock Hall's existing interior spaces, requiring the expansion to enable the institution to increase its reach and clout.

## **Expanding on Pei**

For Chakrabarti, the expansion project raised the difficult question about how to expand a building that wasn't designed to be expandable.

"It is a delicate matter to touch an I.M Pei building," he said. "It's not something you do lightly but it had to be done."

The PAU team took special pains to touch the Pei pyramid as lightly as possible. The triangular roof of the expansion will intersect the glass pyramid along an existing horizontal line of window mullions where panes will be removed without slicing the glass diagonally.

"It is a very delicate piece of surgery," Chakrabarti said. "We're never cutting into it like a piece of paper."

There will be no connection between the interior steel framing of the Pei building and the steel columns and beams holding up the new wing. The joint between the two structures will include dual rain gutters designed to capture water coming from each structure, without mixing. The connections are designed to expand and contract during Cleveland's brutal freeze-thaw cycles without leaking.

The canopy over the original plaza-level entry will be removed, but the existing doors will remain, albeit inside the glass-enclosed eastern end of the new wing.

Sustainable features in the design include a geothermal system using Lake Erie for cooling, and a green roof for the new wing supported by mass timber beams of glue-laminated Douglas fir.

The architects of record for the project are from Robert P. Madison International, of Cleveland, and the Cleveland office of DLR Group. Osborn Engineering of Cleveland is also serving the project, as is James Corner Field Operations, the landscape firm that designed the \$50 million renovation of Public Square completed in 2016.

He called it “an architecture of convening” where people of different walks and beliefs can come together.

“Rock and roll is a bipartisan thing,” he said. There are people from every ideological end of the spectrum and cultural background who love rock and roll.”