

# American Museum of Science and Energy's Transition to Main Street Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 11, 2017)

Oak Ridge's amazing story is the envy of several past Heritage Tourism studies. We now are focusing on Heritage and Science Tourism as the broader approach to increasing tourism in Oak Ridge.

The American Museum of Science and Energy has been the central focus of Heritage Tourism in Oak Ridge in the past and remains so today. The Oak Ridge history room there is often the starting point for many tourists who seek to learn our historical beginnings. The DOE Public Bus Tour is one of the main draws that also brings Heritage and Science Tourists to our city.

The Manhattan Project National Historical Park was established on November 10, 2015, and brought fresh minds to bear on the Oak Ridge story. The recent announced decision to move AMSE to Main Street Oak Ridge now provides an opportunity to examine more fully our overall approach to Heritage and Science Tourism.

It might help to briefly remind us of the beginning of Oak Ridge. The effort to purchase what ultimately became nearly 60,000 acres in these East Tennessee valleys and ridges was initiated by General Leslie Groves on September 19, 1942. Groves wanted to locate the first production facility of the Manhattan Project in East Tennessee. He was anxious to get started.

Construction on the Administration Building that became the "Castle on the Hill" was begun in November 1942 - according to the John Hendrix legend right between Tadlock's farm and Pyatt's place. All of this happened in 1942 and even more in 1943. But the Oak Ridge story does not end with the Manhattan Project, it was just the beginning!

Now, Oak Ridge is 75 years old in 2017 and the Anniversary Celebrations have already begun. Denise Kiernan was here on September 15, 2017 at the Grove Theater, groundbreaking for the Friendship Bell Peace Pavilion was September 21, 2017, Ruth Carey Photo Days was held on September 23, 2017 at the Oak Ridge Public Library, and more such days are coming.

Next was the Then & Now Historic Fire Prevention Parade and Celebration on October 7, 2017 at Oak Ridge Turnpike and A. K. Bissell Park at 10 AM. There are many more events being scheduled. See [www.oakridge75th.com](http://www.oakridge75th.com). Many more activities will be forthcoming. You will want to be a part of many of them!

The plans for moving the American Museum of Science and Energy to Main Street Oak Ridge are progressing well. A working group, with the help of a professional museum design company that is very familiar with Oak Ridge history has just completed a comprehensive preliminary design concept. Whew, that was a lot of work, but it has really turned out nice. The planned exhibits are state of the art and the theme and supporting elements are attention getting and will undoubtedly be attractive to all ages.

A recent update on the status of the AMSE transition was provided by Geoffrey deBeauclair, Deputy Manager of the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge Office, to the Rotary Club of Oak Ridge who held their weekly meeting on September 28, 2017, at the present location of AMSE. Geoff spoke on the transition schedule and the many actions being taken in the planning for the move.

He noted that the date for transition had now been changed to sometime next year. I would say likely before mid-year, but a firm date has not been set as the planning still underway will determine what must be done before a move can be accomplished. I am sure a date will be set and published as soon as it can be determined.

I have been involved in the working group and am a board member of the AMSE Foundation, so I have been engaged in this process from the time the announced transfer of the 17 acres on which the AMSE museum has been located since 1975. This action was the last of many attempts that have been made of the past 20 plus years to make other arrangements for managing the museum.

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As an introduction to Geoff's update, Ken Mayes, Deputy Director of the museum and President of the Tennessee Museum Association, presented a brief history of AMSE. He started at its origin on March 19, 1949, on Jefferson Avenue, when the city of Oak Ridge was first opened to the public to the relocation to the present building in 1975. Ken concluded with a description of the museum today.

Ken noted that the original operating contract was with the Oak Ridge Institute for Nuclear Studies. He then took the audience through all the other contracting arrangements over the years to the present arrangement with UT-Battelle.

Geoff noted the present contracting arrangement would continue for the near term, but that other arrangements are being sought. Again, this is not a new position for DOE. An example of an effective museum operating arrangement with DOE is the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Jim Walther, the Executive Director of that museum, has visited Oak Ridge and is attempting to help us understand the success he has had there.

Jim attended, along with four other successful museums across the nation, in 2013 as efforts were beginning to examine the best model for taking AMSE to the next phase of its existence. The workshop reinforced the opportunities Oak Ridge had for capitalizing on Heritage and Science Tourism. We still need to improve there, and I believe the new AMSE will help.

AMSE has had 60,000 visits this past year and I believe the number has been as high as 80,000 per year some years in the past. The DOE Public Bus Tour has been expanded from three months to nine months and doubled the number of tours. These tours have been essentially full. Maybe it is time to consider expanding them further to daily and include Saturdays.

Surely Oak Ridge tours should be increased to the level needed to meet the demand of tourists, many of whom come to Oak Ridge expressly to take that tour! Maybe it is time for additional tours within the city and remember, the K-25 History Center is scheduled to begin construction within a few weeks.

The new AMSE in Main Street Oak Ridge can be the central Heritage and Science Tourism visitor's "hub" in the center of Oak Ridge. In partnership with Explore Oak Ridge the intent is to bring added clarity to the Heritage and Science Tourism approach. It is going to be exciting to see what can be accomplished!

To give you some insight into what is being planned for the new location for AMSE, the preliminary design includes concepts for the details of the exterior first impression, the main entry and entrance lobby, the orientation theater and a series of exhibits and artifacts that cover the diverse missions of the three DOE sites. An auditorium and two classrooms are included as well as a museum store.

As a result of this effort by the professional museum consultants and the working group, it is now apparent that much needs to be done before the actual transition of AMSE to Main Street Oak Ridge can physically occur. This is but one reason for the transition schedule being changed into next year.

Great care is being taken to ensure the building renovations are properly planned and completed in order to professionally communicate Oak Ridge's story. In my eyes, a higher quality result is well worth a small delay, particularly when we're likely to live with it for years to come.

Our Oak Ridge story is an amazing and captivating one when well told and presented. It is a great, great story! And, it's ours to tell every single day. This new facility will help us do just that!

We need a great place to tell it! It is hard to think of a better place than a new and reinvigorated AMSE!

I am personally much impressed with the work being done to prepare for the new exhibits. I think you will be amazed when you see the final concept in place. AMSE will continue to be the proud hub of our

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Heritage and Science Tourism. It will continue to be the launching pad for the DOE Public Bus Tours and likely an expanded version in the coming years.

I'm excited by the future potential of an AMSE with new state of the art exhibits and located in the center of Main Street Oak Ridge. I am anxious for you to see the results of the plans as soon as they can be finalized.

I would be pleased to provide a conduit for answers to any questions this article may generate. I will either answer from my working group knowledge and experience or will consult with others who may be more fully aware of specific details.

I can be reached at 865-482-4224 or [draysmith@comcast.net](mailto:draysmith@comcast.net).



Existing facility will remain in use until sometime next year

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Here is the space in Main Street Oak Ridge where the new AMSE will be located