

Expanded ND Heritage Center sees record visitors

By Mike Nowatzki

Forum News Service

BISMARCK — Swiss national Romain Lauper didn't know what to expect when he arrived in North Dakota for the first time this week, but he definitely didn't think he'd find a museum the size and caliber of the newly expanded North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck.

"Absolutely not. I had no idea," he said Tuesday while viewing the T-Rex, triceratops and other dinosaur fossils with his brother and parents in the museum's Adaptation Gallery.

Visitors from foreign countries helped the Heritage Center surge to a record of more than 150,000 visitors this year, State Historical Society Director Claudia Berg said.

The museum averaged about 100,000 visitors annually before undergoing a \$51.7 million, 97,000-square-foot expansion, Berg said.

Visitation this year didn't start to pick up until April 28, when the first two of the museum's four new galleries opened, Berg said.

The record count of 150,000-plus visitors doesn't include the tally for December, which is typically a busy month, she said, not-

ing several school groups have toured the museum this month.

"We get a lot of people that have friends and relatives here (for the holidays), and they tend to come to the museum one day," she said.

The 2009 Legislature appropriated \$39.7 million from state funds for the expansion and renovation

project, and the Historical Society Foundation raised the other \$12 million from private sources. Construction started in March 2011.

More than 4,400 people attended the grand opening on Nov. 2, when Gov. Jack Dalrymple remarked that people were already calling it "the Smithsonian on the prairie."

Berg said remarks from visitors have been "very complimentary."

"It's been a long process in the making, and it's been gratifying, the public response," she said.

Visitors from all 50 states and a number of foreign countries have penned their names in the Heritage Center's guestbook.

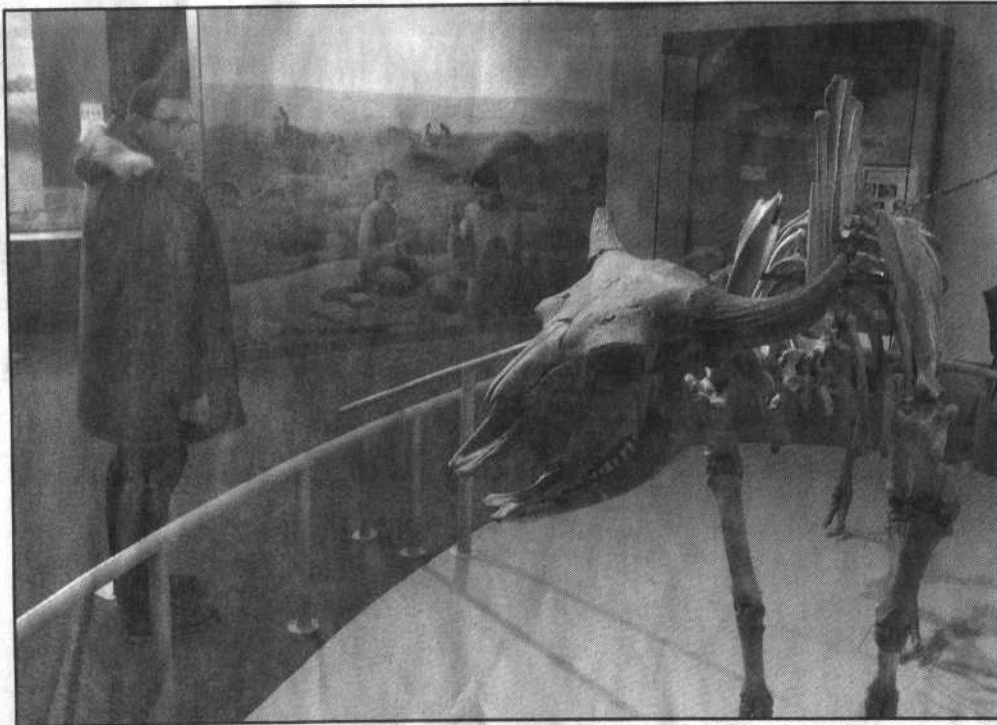
Lauper said his family, who hail from the city of Avenches in the French-speaking region of Switzerland, visited the museum at the recommendation of Romain Lauper's sister, who is living and working in Jamestown through an international exchange program.

He was impressed by the museum's exhibits and breadth of information.

"It's pretty cool," he said. Operation of the expand-

ed museum has gone "relatively well," Berg said, but she noted it's still relying on temporary staff, "because there's no way we could manage it with current staff levels."

The historical society's budget request sought 11 additional staff members, 10 of whom would work in the Heritage Center. Dalrymple is recommending state lawmakers approve six of the full-time positions.



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Romain Lauper of Avenches, Switzerland, views the skeleton of the extinct bison antiquus Tuesday at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck.

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