

CORPORATE POCKETS SHORE UP AQUARIUM

Marcus: Fish tank will be world's largest

By [JIM THARPE](#)

GEORGIA AQUARIUM BENEFACTOR Bernie Marcus announced Wednesday that his fish tank will be the "largest in the world" and carry a significantly higher price tag than its initial projected cost of \$200 million.

It also will need a little help from some of his corporate friends.



The Home Depot co-founder said six companies have signed on as "presenting sponsors" to help fill the construction-cost gap, but declined to say how much they will contribute or what the final aquarium cost will be.

"It's significantly more than \$200 million," Marcus said at a news conference at the aquarium, which is located at the north end of Centennial Olympic Park in downtown Atlanta.

Executives in the Atlanta business community who have been solicited by Marcus place the cost at about \$280 million, but Marcus declined comment on that specific figure.

"I'm not going to answer that," Marcus said. "It's a lot more expensive than I thought. But it didn't change my mind. At one point I could've backed out. But I said, 'No, I want to do it and I want to do it the right way.' This is the right way."

Marcus said he is raising his \$200 million contribution to the aquarium's construction cost and announced that AirTran Airways, BellSouth, Georgia-Pacific, The Home Depot, Southern Co. and SunTrust Banks will sponsor exhibits at the facility. The sponsors also declined comment about specifics of the arrangement.

"We'll announce at a later date what piece of the aquarium we will sponsor," said Jeff Battcher, a spokesman for BellSouth. "The dollar figure is something we're not going to make available now."

Without the sponsors' help, Marcus said, the aquarium likely would have had to cut one exhibit from its original proposal.

"We didn't want to cut any corners at all," he said. "And these sponsors made that possible."

Coca-Cola donated nine acres of land for the aquarium, and United Parcel Service has provided a \$1 million in-kind donation for fish and whale transportation.

Marcus, who made a fortune in the home-improvement business, is building the aquarium as a thank you to the people of Georgia, who were responsible for the success of his first Home Depot stores. The aquarium, which opens Nov. 23, later will be turned over to a nonprofit board.

Many of the aquarium's details have been shrouded in secrecy by Marcus, including its precise dimensions. He slowly has been lifting the veil in recent weeks.

Marcus announced Wednesday, for example, the Georgia Aquarium's tanks will hold 8 million gallons of water, including 6 million gallons in the colossal tank — 263 feet long, 126 feet wide and 33 feet deep — containing two whale sharks. Whale sharks are the largest fish on Earth, and the Atlanta fish tank will be the only aquarium outside of Asia to display the gentle plankton feeders.

Chicago's Shedd Aquarium, which currently bills itself as the largest enclosed aquarium in the United States, contains about 5 million gallons of water.

The Georgia Aquarium also will encompass more than a half-million square feet of space and display more than 100,000 fish. Those numbers, Marcus said, will make the aquarium the largest fish tank on the planet and increase its drawing power. People want to say they've seen the biggest, Marcus said. He predicted 2.3 million to 3 million visitors a year will tour the Georgia facility.

Ken Peterson, a spokesman for the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, said superlatives initially help to draw visitors.

"But in the end it's all about the experience people have, and whether they enjoy it and find it entertaining and if it's varied enough that they want to come back," Peterson said.

Marcus also announced that the aquarium will import three female beluga whales from another aquarium on a "breeding loan." Those females will be paired at the aquarium with two male belugas that the aquarium is rescuing from a substandard display tank at a Mexico City amusement park.

"Hopefully, we'll have little belugas coming along," Marcus said. "We'll play some romantic music and see what happens."