

ANOTHER VIEW



First Coast Aquarium

Rendering of the aquarium that a group is pushing to be built in Downtown Jacksonville.
[HASKELL COMPANY]

An aquarium would be attraction Downtown needs



Jasmine Marshall

It's hard not to compare Jacksonville's Downtown area to other cities, especially when we have so many opportunities.

It's frustrating that a sprawling coastal city with breathtaking views split by a majestic river has managed to fumble the ball for so long.

Atlanta, with its well-documented traffic problems and population density, has a more lively downtown. Among the most impressive attractions is the Georgia Aquarium, one of the largest aquariums in the world. On a recent visit there was a sizable line wrapped through an intricate maze of belt barriers leading to its ticket office on an otherwise unremarkable Thursday afternoon in July.

Throughout the most recent years of revitalization of Jacksonville's Downtown, people have pointed to the desire for an attraction or amusement park of some sort. That Thursday, as I spent the afternoon watching jellyfish, manta rays and sharks float above my head, I was reminded of the reasons why an aquarium Downtown could be just the thing for revitalization.

There's already overwhelming support. For the past five years a grassroots organization has worked to bring an aquarium Downtown. Aquajax brought plans for its first project to the 2014 One Spark festival. Offering a rather lofty vision of a 150,000-square-foot, world class aquarium on Downtown's riverfront, the group's goals included experiences with the

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Jacksonville Zoo, a partnership with OCEARCH and outreach with several local schools and universities.

The message resonated with One Spark festivalgoers, earning the highest public votes in the Science category and \$13,794 to put toward the venture's \$50,000 feasibility study. Second place went to the St. Augustine Aquarium.

Now Aquajax is showing sure signs of life and a willingness to see the project through.

Potential for economic impact

Jacksonville has been shattering its records for tourism and visitation. According to a Visit Jacksonville report published this spring, the first three months of the year saw an increase of \$12 million in hotel revenue from the same quarter in 2017. March was the best month on record with hotel occupancy at 82.2 percent.

Tourism in Jacksonville generates just over \$3 billion annually. These amounts could be sustained or even bolstered by what moves the city makes next.

The river is a defining attribute

An aquarium Downtown would open countless possibilities to capitalize on the aquatic environments on the First Coast; there are beaches, marshes, estuaries and Downtown's defining feature, the St. Johns River. Our bodies of water and a smattering of wetlands open up exhibitions

and research opportunities that would make an aquarium Downtown a unique experience.

A comparable example would be Albany, Ga.'s Flint River aquarium, which sits at the bank of the Flint River. Though small — the aquarium is just 54,000 square feet — its impact is immeasurable.

The aquarium explains the science behind the river ecosystem that has shaped much of Southwest Georgia, bringing visitors close to the diverse marine life, indigenous birds and natural environment.

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The Visit Jacksonville report details spikes in visitation from Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and other cities in the Southeast, and its location serves a demographic of travelers seeking a good time at local haunts, high end shops, beaches and museums.

An aquarium could only serve as an added pull for regional visitors.

Jasmine Marshall is a photographer and freelance journalist.

THUMBS UP AND DOWN



A tree canopy covers Monroe Street at Laura Street with Hemming Park to the right. Why can't more of Downtown look like this? There is shade and a narrow Monroe Street that is more inviting to pedestrians than cars. [MIKE CLARK/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]

Hemming Park is safe and welcoming

By Times-Union Editorial Board

There are two keys to the comeback of Hemming Park: Get rid of the undesirable activities and replace them with wholesome ones.

It's clear from the quarterly report of the Friends of Hemming Park that the undesirable have been cleared out or helped out. While the wholesome activities have a way to go, there are some good bets on the calendar. That's why Hemming Park deserves a **Thumbs up**.

Just about all of the city of Jacksonville's subsidies to the park go to funding ambassadors and private security.

Those representatives have cleared out the troublemakers, leaving JSO officers to do. There were just 11 serious offenses reported at the park during June. There are virtually no alcohol or illegal drug offenses there now.

Damien Lamar Robinson, director of office administration, said the ambassadors have an important role as welcomers. The park receives a fair amount of traffic from visitors to the city as well as locals.

The motto of the ambassadors has been borrowed from the Ritz Carlton, "Anticipate the unexpressed need of the customer." If someone is looking for a place to sit, be ready with a chair.

Armed with a reduction in negative behavior, combined with more positive activities, the perception of the park is "beginning to change dramatically," Robinson said.

Christina Parrish Stone, the activities director for eight months, said the lunchtime food truck schedule is downpat now with at least every weekday. There are regulars Downtown who come for lunch. As for music, there are individual musicians on Mondays and Wednesdays and a full band on Fridays.

What's next? More beautification and landscaping, more culturally diverse events and more publicity. The word needs to spread about the new and improved Hemming Park.

Parrish Stone set up a booth at the Riverside Arts Market, which has been a great success on Saturdays. She was surprised to find

many people who were unaware of Hemming Park's revival.

"We are seeing a really wonderful mix of people in the park. We treat them all as guests," she said.

Some of the guest may be people who need help. The park employs a staffer to connect people with social services. This is probably the least known success story at Hemming Park.

Since October 2014, there have been 3,542 contacts, 70 housing placements and 422 resume and job contacts.

Far from just running off people, those who want help are getting it.

One remaining issue is at night when security is gone. There is some vandalism taking place. While not a safety issue, it's a remaining challenge.

Bill Prescott, board chairman of the Friends of Hemming Park, said "the park really has changed dramatically. We really hit our stride a year ago. We're now moving on. We really do have welcoming down."

Living Downtown: A ways to go

As we count down the 20 traits of successful downtowns developed by the Destination Development Association, we have reached a common refrain for Jacksonville.

We don't have enough people living Downtown. The Southbank includes apartment dwellers in the towers near the Riverwalk. And there are the apartments developed by Vestcor at the Carling and 11 E. Forsyth.

The standard goal is 10,000 Downtown residents. The latest count from Downtown Vision lists 4,842 residents.

However, there are enough housing units being planned to add another 5,400 Downtown residents. Bingo: The magic number of 10,000 residents is within sight.

Downtown still needs a lot more people who consider it home, so this metric gets a **Thumbs down**, but it we need a bullet.

We just need more Downtown residents. Meanwhile, Downtown waits for more grocery stores, a drug store, a dry cleaners and more retail generally.

The Score: 2 of 7.

ANOTHER VIEW: DOWNTOWN

Portsmouth's image moves from opioids to planters

By Friends of Portsmouth

Friends of Portsmouth, a local nonprofit organization involved with community growth and prosperity, announced today that it has raised a small army of volunteers to revitalize the main downtown area of its injured Ohio town. It also has announced that it will be attempting to set the Guinness World Record for the most people potting plants simultaneously on Aug. 18.

The event will kick-off with a massive power washing of all the main street concrete sidewalks and brick

pavers. That afternoon, Plant Portsmouth volunteers will paint light poles, street signs, street curbs and will line the roads that are set to be repaved. To preserve their accomplishment, volunteers will reinforce and seal the brick.

Finally, volunteers will cap the event by planting U.S. flags from each downtown light pole to remind Portsmouth citizens that it was once considered an All-American City, and it will be again!

"In one day, the image of our downtown will change immediately so we can start believing in ourselves again. Our downtown currently

feels like it looks. Weeds, corrosion, and desolation," says event chairperson and local attorney, Jeremy Burnside. "It looks like the despair that the national media has been reporting about us."

Portsmouth, Ohio has been in the national spotlight for over a decade due to the devastating effects from the rise and fall of its "pill mills."

In the early 2000s, these self-proclaimed pain management clinics funneled several million pills annually into this town of approximately 20,000 citizens. Once the government shut them down, the pills fell on

the black market, allowing heroin and deadlier drugs to take over. Portsmouth's significance in the national opioid epidemic spotlight has been featured in books, national television exposés and several articles in national media outlets including The New York Times, The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and Chicago Tribune.

"Our hope is that an epic one-day downtown transformation and setting a Guinness World Record title will encourage outsiders, including businesses, to plant Portsmouth as a destination for business relocation,

tourism, and raising a family. For those of us who live and work here, we aim to plant Portsmouth pride back in our hearts so that it grows."

In just three weeks, Plant Portsmouth has raised over \$50,000 from business sponsors.

These sponsors have agreed to provide a team of workers for the block they agreed to revitalize. The event organizers forecast raising nearly \$100,000 toward the efforts and plan to donate any remaining proceeds to a town ambassador program, to preserve the work and hope that the event envisions.