

viewpoint

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Hemming Park is more than just a park



ron
littlepage
times-union
columnist

Making Hemming Park viable isn't just a feel good idea.

It's good for business, and it's a critical part of revitalizing downtown.

The business argument was made earlier this week during a meeting of the City

Council Finance Committee, which was considering legislation to give additional funding to the Friends of Hemming Park for at least two more months.

The group took over operation of the park in 2014, concentrating in large part on adding programs that would turn the park into a lively gathering place instead of the embarrassing stain on downtown's reputation that it had become.

The recent furor over how the Friends spent \$1.1 million in city money put the park's future in doubt and cut into the programming that had been in place.

Liz Earnest, a cofounder of the Candy Apple Cafe, located in what was once the Seminole Club, is one of those who has taken a chance on downtown.

Business had been going great, Earnest told the Finance Committee, and there was a "symbiotic relationship" between the programs in the park and customers coming to the cafe.

In June and July when the programs fell off, her business declined, she said.

Pete Behringer of Sweet Pete's, the candy operation adjacent to the cafe, told the Finance Committee the same thing.

And Chamblin's Uptown Bookstore and Cafe, which moved to its location about a half block from Hemming Park in 2006 during what was described as a "very scary" time to be downtown, also reported that with the programming came more customers.

Earnest said other businesses have expressed interest in following them to downtown, but uncertainty over the park's future causes that interest to wane.

Recent suggestions from some City Council members that the park should be shut down and a fence built around it certainly hasn't helped.

Fortunately, the Finance Committee backed away from that tack Wednesday and approved spending \$58,000 to keep Friends of Hemming Park operating through the end of this fiscal year.

There is a solid business argument for the city investing in the park to make it a place people want to visit.

The full City Council will still have to approve that when it meets Tuesday night. And Mayor Lenny Curry's proposed budget for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 includes \$250,000 for Hemming Park for the first six months of the new fiscal year.

Friends of Hemming Park is now under new leadership with Bill Prescott serving as the interim director. Prescott is a former chief financial officer for the Jacksonville Jaguars and the principal in an investment banking firm.

Council members appear to have confidence in Prescott, and he pledged to the Finance Committee that he will remain as interim director for at least six months to help reshape the organization.

Programming is critical to the park's success. Just as important is creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere.

The Friends will need help with that.

The Sheriff's Office will need to play a bigger role, and city ordinances need to be reviewed to allow for better enforcement of the park's rules.

The city also will have to step up its efforts to help the homeless. Other cities have been successful in doing that.

There's no reason Jacksonville can't do that as well.

As for those council members who complain about putting so much effort into one park, the answer is simple. Hemming Park is not just a park.

It's the very heart of downtown. Every great city has a great downtown.

If Hemming fails, our downtown fails. And downtown is about more than just having a good time. As described to the Finance Committee, it's about business and jobs.

"We believe in downtown," Behringer told the Finance Committee. "We want to do something to help our city."

Other business will as well if Jacksonville doesn't blow this opportunity to create something good downtown.

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Rediscovering our small-town virtues

point of view

garrison keillor

Life is good if you have your health and not all bad even if you don't — which is sometimes forgotten

in an election year, what with the high-pitched oratory on behalf of the embittered rich and people with ingrown toenails and what not.

Apparently we are on the verge of losing our Second Amendment rights and will need to defend ourselves with tent stakes and bug spray.

I had an uncle, a farmer, who suffered from chronic hemorrhoids. But he knew a druggist who sold an ointment made from opium and wormwood and it worked like a charm.

The druggist was Catholic and we were born-again so there was moral compromise involved. But when Uncle Gene was in need, he eased himself into his 1947 Ford with his special doughnut cushion and drove to town and got the cure. An illegal drug sold by a man who sent money to buy golden shoelaces for the Pope.

But what are you going to do?

"There are things more important than being right," Uncle Gene said once on his way home from the druggist.

Think about that for a moment.

WHERE IS THE OLD AMERICA?

I loved the old America where children roamed the neighborhood unsupervised and you hitch-hiked and got to meet strangers.

You knew people's jobs.

My Uncle Lawrence fixed cars.

My dad was a carpenter: You watched him run the board through the circular saw and brace it against the joists and nail it into place, whack, whack, whack.

Uncle Aldridge was a small-town doctor. I watched him, at the supper table, extract a fishing lure from the eyebrow of a weeping boy while the rest of us sat and ate our meatloaf and string beans.

The old America endures, as long as baseball endures. Or gardening. Or joke-telling. Or the state fair where people go to see pigs the size of Volkswagens.

It endures along with church suppers.

If you were a Syrian refugee resettled in Grover's Corners, you should come to church suppers.

Buy a raffle ticket to win the outboard

We survive by virtue of people extending themselves, welcoming the young, showing sympathy for the suffering. That is America.

motor and sit down with a plate of beans and baked chicken, potato salad, a roll, a slab of pie, and learn the art of small talk.

"So how are you doing?"

"Not so bad. Can't complain."

"Drove by your house and your lawn is looking pretty good."

"Well, we've had enough rain, that's for sure."

"How is your daughter doing?"

"Well, we don't hear much from her, so she must be OK."

THEN EVERYTHING CHANGED

You will find common decency here, the common crucial values that are about marriage, parenthood, friendship, work, faith and attitude.

You're surrounded by people who've known each other for 50 years, and decency dictates that they show you hospitality.

In the 1980s, we chose lifestyle over principle and you saw vineyards cropping up everywhere — even North Dakota has a Wine Country — where people who used to care about justice sit around appreciating the bouquet of gardenias and brook trout and the long finish with overtones of particle board. Old people who are on OxyContin for their arthritis toss back a flagon of Riesling and a plate of Brie. And so here we are in the present dilemma.

Style is not what keeps us going.

We survive by virtue of people extending themselves, welcoming the young, showing sympathy for the suffering, taking pleasure in each other's good fortune.

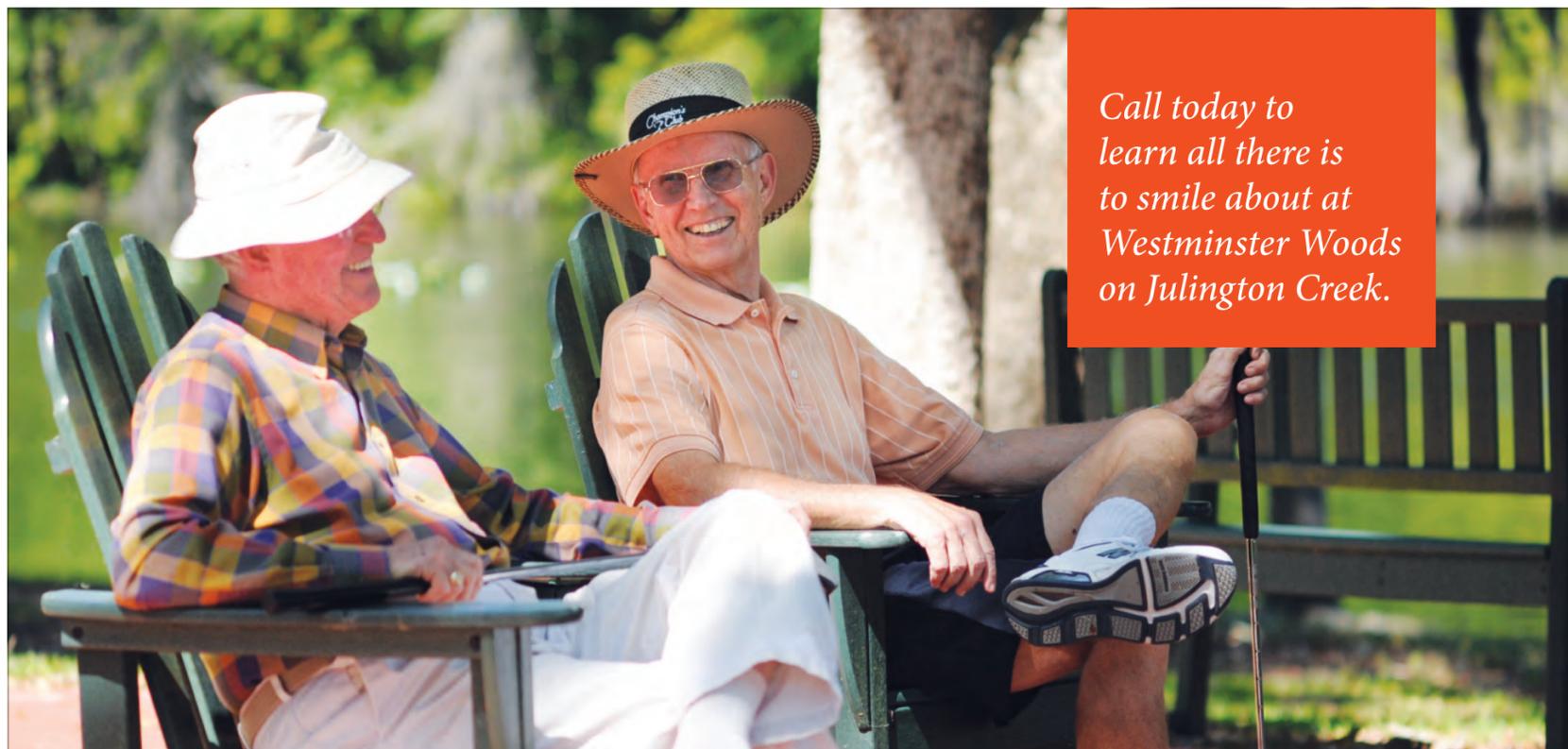
We are here for a brief time. We would like our stay to mean something.

Do the right thing.

Travel light.

Be sweet.

Garrison Keillor is an author and radio personality.



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