

opinion

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A VERSE FOR TODAY
"Peace be within your walls, Prosperity
within your palaces."
Psalm 122: 7

Hemming Park's reboot is underway

Jacksonville can't revive its Downtown without first repairing the front yard of City Hall.

Hemming Park needs to be an iconic anchor for Downtown. Now, after a few stumbles, it appears to be on the right track.

The Friends of Hemming Park were focused at first on programming, realizing that they need Downtown workers to leave their offices and visit the park.

But after a few confrontations with City Council, they realized what must come first.

So the city government's support of the park is largely being devoted to keeping it "clean and safe," said Friends of Hemming Park CEO Bill Prescott in an interview.

With park security officers present, there is consistency and safety. The officers know the regulars and the bad actors. If fines can be used, fine. If not, the city can charge people when they violate park rules.

"When our security calls, JSO knows us," Prescott said. "That collaboration really works well with ambassadors keeping the park clean."

The park's appearance is being upgraded with decorative fencing and mulch. A kids zone makes the implied statement that the park is a friendly place for families.

Coming soon will be a sculpture garden, first with temporary items. The Cultural Council and MOCA are partners in this effort.

Coming soon will be more greenery and lighting.

The Confederate statue, a centerpiece is fenced off while maintenance work is underway. Planters with greenery are being added, the same for the main stage. The plants will include more color and more definition.

Most of this work should be finished by September with the sculptures added by October.

Down the road, Prescott says he would like to engage the community and the city.

What is the long-term vision for the park? What can be done to make the park more welcoming for Downtown

residents and for visitors?

In that regard, the weekly Riverside Arts Market is a good template. Hemming Park needs to have regular attractions and then a few surprises.

The park today is basically two parks, Prescott said. There is an upper bowl with activities, food trucks, the future sculpture garden and the kids zone.

The lower bowl is focused more on pedestrians and special events.

What would Jacksonville like?

A permanent stage?

Grass in the lower bowl for an amphitheater?

A water feature? That might add some coolness to an area that already includes generous shade, unlike too much of Downtown.

In the next fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, the vision will be the priority along with raising private dollars.

ACTIVITIES ARE BUILDING

The park is a welcoming place to sit in the shade, have lunch and listen to live musicians. Downtown workers are pleasantly surprised by what they find, Prescott said.

There are Toddler Tuesdays.

And there are regular events. Signature events include a Bourbon and Barbecue Festival, a beer festival, Florida Spirits and Cocktail Festival and an Asian Food Festival, a big hit.

The park also wants to be a host for third party events such as the monthly Art Walk, Gastrofest and the Jazz Festival. Labor Day weekend will feature a Caribbean jerk fest, hosted by a third party.

"We need to get the people out of the buildings and into the park, especially in September and October when the weather is really nice," Prescott said.

Building on the family-friendly theme, there are natural neighbors such as the Main Library, MOCA, Sweet Pete's Candy Store, Chamblin's Uptown and, of course, City Hall.

"There are so many visitors to City Hall, we need this to represent the city well," Prescott said.

Hemming Park needs to be a Downtown icon.



The reworked portion on the east side of Hemming Park, reveals the fountain surrounded by mulch and a low chain link fence replacing the raised planters, pavers and sitting areas. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union).

HEMMING TIMELINE

1866: The heirs of Isaiah Hart, the city's founder, sold the park to the city for \$10. What a deal.

1899: Confederate veteran Charles Hemming dedicated a monument to the park. It's renamed Hemming Park. Previous names were City Park and St. James Park.

1901: The Hemming monument was the lone structure standing in the park after the Great Fire of 1901.

1977: Hemming was redesigned with bricks and pavers and renamed as Hemming Plaza.

Landmarks: Besides the monument, there is a statue of former Rep. Charles Bennett, a monument to President John F. Kennedy, a plaque for the 1901 fire and a plaque memorializing Ax Handle Saturday, Aug. 27, 1960.

Downtown

Improve it but don't gentrify it

A sampling of comments on Downtown from the Times-Union's Facebook page:

• **Kerry Decker:** There are multiple things the city could do that don't require anything from private developers and would go a long way in bringing Downtown back to life.

1. Return all Downtown streets to two-ways.
2. Put in bike lanes on every street.
3. Tax vacant lots and surface parking (land value tax).
4. Get rid of the homeless population.
5. Install pay stations for parking instead of meters.
6. Institute a bike-share program.
7. Stick to the development ordinances and stop caving on them.
8. Build a real central park.
9. Reduce the number of City Council members and change to a city manager government.

• **William Watson:** Careful what you wish for Duval. As a Jacksonville native who has lived in Orlando and now Seattle, a desirable downtown brings out that evil "g" word: Gentrification. As soon as the Landing turns into a "Pike's Place Market" and a light rail/street car extends beyond Downtown, say goodbye to affordability.

Neighborhoods like Murray Hill, Springfield and Riverside will turn into Avondale, Ortega and San Marco. I'm for seeing a booming Downtown for the hometown, just keep the locals in mind.

• **Rick Puckett:** If you want to revitalize Downtown you have to have cheap or free parking and affordable housing. I was just in New Haven and its Downtown is amazing. Lots of restaurants shopping, museums, movie theater, nightlife and free parking! Plus lots of affordable housing. And they also have homeless people, but they have a visible police force Downtown that stops the panhandling.

And the No. 1 thing, they have good-paying jobs Downtown!

LETTER POLICY

Letters of about 200 words are preferred. Letters are edited for space, clarity and newspaper style. All letters should include a name, address, occupation and telephone number. Only the name, city and occupation (when relevant) are published. Letters with a clear, concise message have the best chance of being published.

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Letters from Readers

WHEN OPIOIDS ARE LEGITIMATE INNOCENT PEOPLE ARE HURT

Painkillers are necessary for some people to have a certain quality of life. If the pills are prescribed by a reputable physician, there is no problem.

Why do the innocent have to pay the price for the abusers?

Find and punish the abusers.
Patricia Faunt, Jacksonville

OPIOID EPIDEMIC

A LAWSUIT ISN'T ENOUGH

The current problem, which needs to be addressed urgently, is death due to heroin overdose. Heroin is cheap and readily available on our streets from Mexico.

Addiction is bad enough, but sadly, the heroin is often tainted with fentanyl, and a young life full of promise is cut short. The general public is not aware of how bad this situation is.

Education and communication are key for parents, children, teachers, preachers, law enforcement, the entire "village."

Filing a lawsuit might be a future step, but we need to take bold steps now to protect our loved ones and our country as a whole.

Susan Carter, Jacksonville

A TOURISM IDEA

SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

Under the leadership of Mayor Lenny Curry and Council Member Lori Boyer, Jacksonville is working hard to improve tourism and the Downtown.

Kansas City and New Orleans have outstanding museums of World War I and World War II. They are well supported and helpful in educating the public while improving tourism and city recognition.

The Spanish-American War is less well known by the general public, though it had a tremendous effect on Spain, the U.S., Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam!

In addition it brought the U.S. into the

colonizing business.

Jacksonville and Florida had a significant part in that war. A museum on our beautiful riverfront teaching about the Spanish-American War would add to our developing Downtown and tourism.

A team of city and philanthropic funding combined with leadership from our outstanding universities and Jacksonville Historical Society would ensure a successful enterprise.

Lawrence Kanter, Jacksonville

NORTH KOREA

HANDLE IT WELL

Every newly elected president faces challenges. Some are international.

The nuclear weapon program and threats by North Korea represents one of those tests. How well this is handled and resolved will be a factor in future actions by our allies and enemies.

Let us all pray that the president and his staff leaders can guide us safely through this test with a positive resolution for our country.

Henry Warner, St. Augustine

CENTRIST PROJECT

WORK IN THE SYSTEM

I reviewed The Centrist Project website and can certainly empathize with some, but not all of their principles and stated goals. But I get concerned when they state "we believe our government should help."

That means more government interference with my life and more out of my wallet.

I think the Centrist Project would be better served by working inside the current system. They should put their efforts into getting registered independents and No Party Affiliation voters to switch to either the Republican or Democratic parties for the purpose of electing moderate or centrist candidates.

As an example, here in St. Johns County, in the August primary, which I believe

was the most important of all elections, only 24 percent of registered voters cast ballots.

That means 41,000 independent and NPA voters were disenfranchised because Florida has a closed primary.

I'm not going to debate the merits of the closed primaries held in Florida. That's for another time. But I do know under the current system the best candidates don't necessarily win, nor does the independent voter have a voice.

If the independents want to participate in the election process in Florida it's best they re-register, declaring affiliation with one of the two major parties. They can do that via a county website.

Then after the election they can go back to being a registered independent if that makes them feel better. The Centrist Project would be better served if they took their resources and got out the vote.

Linn Grayson, Switzerland

CONFEDERATE STATUES

BAD DECISION BY BROSCHÉ

I can assure City Council President Anna Brosche, whom I voted for, that removing all evidence of the Confederacy will not revise history and, more importantly, improve the lives of those that claim they are "offended" by such symbolism.

In fact, removing all such references that there was a Civil War won't benefit anyone.

Within five years I am very confident that the only evidence of the War Between the States will be those sites and symbols where the North was victorious.

And if Brosche thinks she will get more votes from the left side of the aisle for doing this, I can't see more than 100 people giving her the nod from the left because of her actions.

In fact, she is going to starve on the vine from the Republicans who put her in office.

Derick Brundick, Jacksonville