

Downtown riverfront could be 'everybody's neighborhood'



Your Turn

Nancy Powell and Natalie Rosenberg, et al.
Guest columnists

Riverfront Parks Now is excited to see the momentum in our downtown by so many different constituents, including developers, current and future city leadership, young professionals, nonprofit organizations and the community at large.

We are particularly optimistic about the message that great riverfront public space is good for business, as conveyed by the 2021 duPont Fund's Economic Impact Study.

Riverfront Parks Now started our advocacy in 2020 by showing how world-class downtown waterfronts incorporating public parks, museums, restaurants, recreation, and cultural activities helped revitalize core urban areas, create value for adjacent properties, increase tax revenue, provide resiliency, enhance well-being and bring communities together.

Public investments made by leaders in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Pittsburgh, Chattanooga, Oklahoma City, Nashville and dozens of other cities have generated returns of \$6 or more for every dollar invested. This is true value creation: value for the people, for the private developments,



A rendering of the proposed \$85 million new MOSH facility on the Jacksonville Shipyards site.

PROVIDED BY MOSH

for our river and our city.

These cities committed the funds necessary to ensure world-class design and amenities. The City of St. Petersburg recently spent \$92 million on a 26-acre pier and park. Cincinnati's 32-acre Smale Riverfront Park, at \$120 million total, included approximately 65 percent in public funding from city, state and public grants. The City of Clearwater last year approved additional funding for the \$84 million Imagine Clearwater 24-acre urban waterfront park.

These are not insignificant investments, but cities know these places are an important draw for new residents,

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companies and talent. They produce positive results in terms of economic and community value.

A continuous and green, tree-shaded linear park with key destination areas will perfectly complement the Emerald Trail, MOSH, the Four Seasons and other planned private development to collectively transform our riverfront into a Riverfront for All, a downtown that is everybody's neighborhood.

Now is the time to design, budget and build five priority public spaces that will collectively transform our riverfront experiences:

- Riverfront Plaza (Landing) was designed by Perkins & Will and preliminary plans are being finalized.

- The Liberty Street Marina allows more boaters to access the core of downtown.

- The Shipyards West Park (Kids Kampus replacement) is being designed by Agency Landscape and we need to ensure that sufficient funds are committed to making this public space a showplace.

- We need to connect these spaces with multiple, shaded paths including the Riverwalk Extension and Emerald Trail bike paths to allow sufficient space for bikers, joggers, parents with strollers, and

elderly people enjoying the river.

- Metropolitan Park, which will be adjacent to the new Four Seasons, needs a facelift and RFPs (request for proposals) are going out for the park design and park construction funding is needed.

While this will require a sizable investment to do it right, other cities have demonstrated time and again that it is possible. We have seen too many peer cities pass us by in terms of downtown vibrancy, quality of life, talent retention and developer investment. But with our majestic St. Johns River and its beautiful bridges, we have the potential to set a new standard for an inviting Riverfront for All.

Our downtown riverfront will then become Jacksonville's known signature attraction, an exciting, fun destination, the place you simply must take family and friends, so that our city can enjoy the economic, cultural, social and recreational benefits such a destination will bring.

For more information, visit RiverfrontParksNow.org.

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This guest column is the opinion of the author(s) and does not necessarily represent the views of the Times-Union. We welcome a diversity of opinions.