

## **Museum Starts To Roll On The River**

*Inside Tulane* by Mark Miester

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It's like the Monterey Bay Aquarium, but on the Mississippi River. It's like Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, but with exhibits and entertainment. It's like the Smithsonian Institution, but with more active research. What is it? It's the National Center of the Mississippi River, the Tulane-Xavier river research and museum, which, after two years of planning, appears to be on the verge of happening. The concept of a research center and museum dedicated to the science and culture of the Mississippi River was first championed about five years ago by John Barry, author of *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. Barry met John McLachlan, director of the Tulane-Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research, when the two served as speakers at the 1998 Tulane Educational Conference. Each realized the mix of science and humanities was a powerful one.

But up until now, the development of the National Museum of the Mississippi River has been on paper, the product of the collective vision of the planning group assembled by Barry and McLachlan. In the last two years, the project has evolved into a riverfront complex encompassing a museum dedicated to the science and culture of the Mississippi, a leading-edge research laboratory, meeting rooms and classroom space, a shop and café, and a riverfront amphitheater.

While the center has been in the market for a location to house its museum and research lab, the scientific research component of the center has been in place for a number of years.

"This project is a Tulane-Xavier initiative with other partners," says Doug Meffert, assistant director of the CBR. "It has at its foundation the research and educational activities that we're doing and that we've already been fostering for the last several years. As it stands, our centers invest over \$2 million a year in river and estuary research." The search for a home, however, may be near an end. The center is working to secure the lease to the former River City Casino terminal building on Tchoupitoulas Street. While the project has the blessing of the Port of New Orleans, which owns the building, the center is trying to get Bank One, which owns part of the land underlying the building, to donate the land to the project.

Besides enabling the center to incorporate real-time river research efforts into its exhibits, the riverfront site also could serve as a base for the RV *Eugenie*, a 60-foot river research vessel owned by the university and currently docked on Lake Pontchartrain. In the meantime, organizational work continues. A committee comprising academics and administrators from Tulane and Xavier, as well as community leaders, meets weekly to discuss plans for the center. One point

Meffert emphasizes is that the museum's mission encompasses both scientific and humanities research. Meffert hopes the Tulane-based Deep South Regional Humanities Center will collaborate on cultural research programs. "Since their programming is on the same region, their focus is completely complementary on the cultural side to what we're doing scientifically," he says.

With talk of creating a linear park along the river from Jackson Avenue to the Convention Center, Meffert sees the center as aligning perfectly with the evolving riverfront. "I would like to have a place where people can go to experience everything there is about the river," Meffert says.

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