

## **Life on the Mississippi**

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The Mississippi River inspired the French to establish New Orleans by its banks. It sparked the development of a wide range of industry, from cotton shipping in the plantation era to the cruise ship business in modern times. It spread the city's indigenous jazz music on steamboats, and it continues to fascinate people around the world with its history and lore.

Now, a wave of new projects is taking shape along the river's local bank. Increased park space and cultural destinations are part of a vision for the city's riverfront, all aimed at drawing more people to the river and anchoring redevelopment in nearby business and residential areas.

It's a scenario that local author and historian John Barry has seen play out successfully on waterways of much less stature than the river that Choctaw tribes named "Father of Waters."

"No one can match the allure of the Mississippi, the mythic status of the Mississippi," says Barry, who gained national recognition for his 1997 history "Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America."

"This river is the defining feature of the United States of America," he says. "The potential here (for redevelopment) is unlimited if it's done right."

Planners from groups as varied as the Port of New Orleans, local universities and a national land preservation group hold the same view and are among the many organizations steering big plans for the riverfront. The most advanced projects are concentrated on the stretch of riverfront between the convention center and the Jackson Avenue ferry landing, including a plan to turn 17 acres of aging wharves into a park on a par with downtown's Woldenberg Park. Another plan would establish a museum and research center dedicated to the Mississippi River. Further downriver, plans include building riverfront plazas, an amphitheater connected with the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts and a new cruise ship terminal near the Industrial Canal.

Local architects and planners gathered earlier this year to discuss the many different plans in the works for the riverfront, and City Hall is pushing for greater coordination between the various interests at work.

Taken as a whole, observers say, the plans and the enthusiasm they've engendered reflect a fundamental change in thinking about the river and how to best use it for economic development.

“If you had the Amazon or Nile running through your community, would you put up a wall and block it off, like we have on most of the Mississippi now, or would you open it up and invite people in?” says Ron Forman, executive director of the Audubon Institute, which operates Woldenberg Park, the Aquarium of the Americas and other public facilities fronting the river.

“The river is the most valuable resource this city has, and we support anyone who is interested in developing it,” he says.

### **Vast potential**

There are plenty of people with precisely that interest. In January, the New Orleans chapter of the American Institute of Architects invited developers, planners and business leaders to join its membership to discuss ideas for the riverfront at a four-day brainstorming session.

“We thought we’d do one stretch of the river around the convention center, but there was so much going on we ended up looking from Jackson Avenue to Jackson Barracks,” says John Williams, a local architect who helped organize the event.

One of the plans that generated the most interest during the discussion was RiverSphere, a museum and research center slated for the site of the defunct River City Casino adjacent to the convention center.

The RiverSphere plans are the result of a meeting in 1999 of Barry, who had been trying to spark interest in a river-oriented museum in New Orleans, and John McLachlan, director of the Tulane/Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research, who suggested incorporating an academic component.

The center is now marshalling RiverSphere’s planning. Barry has served on the advisory board of a \$100-million museum and aquarium on the Mississippi River in Dubuque, Iowa, which opened in 2003, and the smaller RiverPark center in Tunica, Miss., which opened on the river’s banks earlier this year.

RiverSphere project coordinator Desiree Johnson says the center will be based on four “core” projects: the Hall of Waters, a museum and exhibit space; the School of the River, including classrooms for local students and visitors; RiverLab, a series of laboratories and studios for ongoing work based on the river; and RiverStage, an outdoor performance space facing the river and inspired by the riverfront amphitheater built for the 1984 World’s Fair in New Orleans and subsequently dismantled.

With a five-year timeline and an estimated price tag of more than \$60 million for completion, proponents have begun looking for funding sources. RiverSphere got a major boost last year when a local business partnership donated more than five

acres of riverfront land where the shuttered casino is located for the center's use. Plans call for redeveloping the 33,000-square-foot casino building as part of RiverSphere's research facility and exhibition halls.

### **Green space**

Concurrent with these plans, the Port of New Orleans has entered into an agreement with the national nonprofit Trust for Public Land to redevelop a series of idle wharves into a new riverfront park stretching for nearly a mile between the convention center and the Jackson Avenue ferry landing.

Port Director Gary LaGrange says the city's shipping industry is moving to larger facilities elsewhere on the river, making these older, narrow wharves available for other uses. Meanwhile, the proximity of the convention center, cruise ship terminals and residential developments in the nearby Lower Garden District make the wharves a prime location for residents and visitors to enjoy the river, he says.

"This is in keeping with our theme of giving the river back to the people," he says.

Plans for the park include landscaping over the wharves, bicycle paths, fountains and concession stands, plus pedestrian bridges over the New Orleans Public Belt Railroad that runs parallel to the wharves. LaGrange says he is also encouraging the Regional Transit Authority to consider extending its Riverfront Streetcar line down the length of the park.

The port has agreed to a 99-year lease of the wharves to the Trust for Public Land, which is now coordinating the park construction project. Larry Schmidt, director of the trust's New Orleans office, says it will probably take seven years to complete the project, including three years to build up enough government and private funding to cover estimated costs of up to \$50 million.

"We hope that by making this investment we get an asset for our residents, but also a catalyst for economic development in the adjacent neighborhoods," Schmidt says.

Eric Eckl, spokesman for the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group American Rivers, says the plans taking shape in New Orleans are part of a national trend.

"A lot of American cities, especially the older ones, turned their backs on the rivers because most of the industrial users were not the most savory," he says. "Times changed, economies changed, and now cities are turning around to face their rivers again."

Eckl says vacant or underutilized riverfront property represents enormous opportunity for urban areas trying to improve their quality of life and lure residents

back from the suburbs. "It's hard to imagine how anyone could ignore the potential for that land right on the riverfront," he says. "Nothing stirs the soul like moonlight shining on a moving river."

Further, Eckl says, the tourism draw of New Orleans brings a unique opportunity for Louisiana to use the river to educate visitors about the erosion of the state's coastline and efforts to restore it. "Anything that helps people from across the country realize what is going on could help get more attention and funding for the problem in Congress," he says.

At City Hall, Mayor Ray Nagin included in his legislative agenda this year a proposal to create a riverfront development agency. While the port would retain its authority over the area, the proposed agency is intended as a way to guide non-maritime development on the riverfront with greater collaboration between the port, city officials and others. City officials say the idea is particularly timely now that New Orleans is becoming a more popular embarkation point for the cruise industry, creating new business opportunities around the river. •