



Despite the Mississippi's position as the lifeblood and defining force in New Orleans, and in some measure of the state as a whole, there is no center dedicated to research or education about the river. Tulane University is trying to that with RiverSphere, which planners are hoping to put on vacant land, BELOW, that's located upriver from the Convention Center

Rolling like the river

PART LABORATORY, PART MUSEUM, TULANE UNIVERSITY'S PLANNED RIVERSPHERE IS CURRENTLY RIDING A TIDE OF SUPPORT. AND IT COULD MAKE NEW ORLEANS AN INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR RIVER STUDIES.

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By Elizabeth Mullener
Staff writer

Scott Cowen was in New York recently, doing what college presidents do these days: scratching around for money. He called on Peter Aron, one of Tulane's venerable and faithful donors, and brought up a number of prospective programs in need of financing. He trotted them out, one after another, and watched for that spark that can mean a check isn't far behind. But the spark was not forthcoming.

"We were chatting about a number of projects," says Cowen, who has set records for fund raising in his tenure as Tulane University's president. "It was, 'Hey, what about this one?' Or, 'By the way, we're also doing this.'"

And then he brought up the RiverSphere.

"His eyes lit up," Cowen says. "He told me this was the kind of thing he could really get interested in."

In due time, Aron forked over \$1.5 million for the project, which



has been upwardly mobile on Tulane's list of fund-raising priorities in recent months -- an enviable and necessary position for ideas in need of money. Today the RiverSphere's assets are a respectable \$11 million.

After five years of high-minded scheming on the part of some big-time dreamers around New Orleans, a center on the levee downtown devoted to the science, art and culture of the Mississippi River seems to have a better chance than ever of taking shape. Comprising a research laboratory, museum, classroom, conference center and performance space, RiverSphere would have the potential of making New Orleans an international center for river studies -- maybe THE international center.

Cowen, who is notoriously cautious on such matters, says the chances RiverSphere will happen in a significant way have moved up from 5 percent to 30 percent recently.

But John McLachlan, a Tulane biologist and chief cheerleader for the project, is anything but cautious in his predictions.

"This is going to happen," he says. "It's 100 percent going to happen. It's taking longer than I thought. But we're close."

From McLachlan's point of view, RiverSphere is too good a plan not to happen.

"If I were not involved in this and somebody presented the idea to me, I would love it," he says. "God knows New Orleans needs a place where the community can have access to its major artery of life.

"The river is so soulful, so primal. It's not just a place of commerce. It informs who we are."

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The RiverSphere project has evolved some in the past few years. It is now conceived more as a laboratory and less as a museum. It is more about adaptive re-use than splashy new architecture. And it is more in the neighborhood of \$50 million than \$150 million.

It is also more doable.

"I think the smartest thing for us is to take what's already there and optimize it, then put any money we can raise into function and program rather than architecture," says McLachlan, whose day job is director of Tulane's Center for Bioenvironmental Research.

After years of fantasies and false starts, RiverSphere first showed signs of taking off last spring with a significant gift from developer Joe Canizaro.

"I'll never forget what he said," McLachlan recalls. "He said, 'You need a stick in the mud.'"

"That's a developer's approach. He meant we needed a place. You can have all the brochures, all the plans in the world. But to make it tangible, to have credibility, you need to be able to say this is where our project will be."

The mud Canizaro -- along with his partners William Goldring and Coleman Adler -- donated to Tulane is more than five

acres that run along the levee from the Delta Queen wharf to an upriver spot about halfway through the shuttered River City Casino near Orange Street. The land alone (the buildings on it are not included) is valued at about \$7 million.

In the earliest phases of RiverSphere planning, a series of high-powered brainstorming sessions sparked talk of a spectacular iconic building designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry, who has always expressed enthusiastic interest in the project. Now the talk is more about securing the River City Casino building and some of the empty wharf structures nearby.

"This is more realistic," says Doug Meffert, deputy director of the Center for Bioenvironmental Research and program director for RiverSphere. "These wharf structures might not be architectural marvels but they function. You walk inside these giant, open, warehouse sheds and you realize you can create anything you want to in these spaces. Any kind of world.

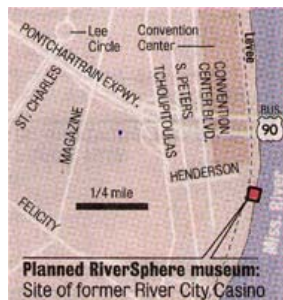
"So something that was initially viewed as a compromise could actually be a strength."

There have been compromises in other areas as well, particularly the balance struck between a public museum and a working scientific research center.

"It would not be a classic museum," says John Barry, whose best-selling book "Rising Tide" sparked the notion for the project in the first place. "It would be a way of communicating very current scientific findings -- some quite dramatic -- to the public."



While the actual facility remains a hotly-pursued dream, Tulane already has a research vessel, the Eugenie, that will be docked at RiverSphere if and when it's built.



"There's a lot of life in this project, even though nothing is resolved. I'm more optimistic about this project than I have been in years"

JOHN BARRY
Author of 'Rising Tide'

Rolling Like The River

McLachlan agrees that the two, ideally, would merge. Scientists, he says, could demonstrate their research projects and talk about them with the public. Visitors could participate by helping collect data.

"This would not be an academic center or research environment in the way you usually think, where only professors or students are allowed," McLachlan says. "This is a place where the university steps outside the ivory tower."

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However it is conceived, the museum aspect of RiverSphere would be housed in a Hall of Waters, as they call it.

Outside the hall will be a narrow 12-story screen, meant to replicate a slice through the river, which is about 12 stories deep at New Orleans. A computer will project pictures of the river, from top to bottom, on the microfiber screen.

"So you'd see what it would be like to stand on the floor of the Mississippi River, watching 152 feet of water coming at you," McLachlan says.

Inside, one exhibit would be a virtual trip along the bottom of the river, growing out of scientists' recent efforts to map it with digital data. A fly-through would be projected on a three-dimensional surface bearing the topography of the sediments and silts and clay that sit on the river's bottom.

Another exhibit might be a large model of the lower Mississippi delta, with all its contours, used to illustrate anything from immigration patterns to the effects of pollutants on humans and other populations. A historical display would tell some of the 3,000 miles of stories that constitute the river from the top of the United States to the bottom.

RiverSphere might be powered by river turbines -- hundreds or thousands of small water wheels that can begin to harness some of the river's energy to generate significant electricity.

"I am told the hydroelectric potential of the river moving through New Orleans is in the same ballpark as Niagara Falls," McLachlan says. "If we can tap into this -- and there is existing technology that says we can -- you can imagine Louisiana achieving the same level of prominence it did in the oil and gas industry."

The laboratories would involve collaborative groups drawn from different disciplines working on issues such as coastal restoration, the invasion of non-native species and the effects of pharmaceuticals in the water system, as well as the river's dead zones and its daily fluctuations.

A performance space seating 400 people would host dance, theater, concerts and other forms of entertainment, many of them river-related.

A dock for the RiverSphere's research vessels would be accessible to visitors interested in going out on the river on a mission with a scientist. A Shakespeare play could be produced on a barge that loads and docks at the RiverSphere's wharf. The Delta Queen might offer lecture cruises during which RiverSphere scholars talk about the science of the Mississippi and the work they're doing. And there would be

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endless opportunities for teaching science to New Orleans public school students.

There is even the possibility that RiverSphere could hook up with two other Mississippi River museums -- one in Tunica, Miss., and one in Dubuque, Iowa -- to form an alliance, possibly even a national park.

"You might think of it as a chain or a string of pearls," says Ken Murphree, who spearheaded the effort to establish the Tunica operation. "Anyone interested in the subject would have to visit all three of these interpretive centers to get the full picture of what the Mississippi River system is like."

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There are some kinks in the proceedings, however.

For one thing, although Canizaro donated half of the land under the casino, Bank One owns the other half, owing to a complex legal proceeding when River City went bankrupt. The bank, so far, has not agreed to donate its half, although the possibility has not been ruled out. At the moment, the land is for sale.

And then there is the matter of the Dock Board, which owns the casino building and the wharf structures, and might or might not be willing to lease them to RiverSphere for a nominal sum. It's a moot point unless the Bank One property agreement comes through, says Joe Cocchiara, a senior manager at the Port of New Orleans, because otherwise the Dock Board is obliged to put the property to maritime use and the RiverSphere project is not quite maritime enough.

"We think it's an excellent concept," Cocchiara says. "Conceptually, we are in favor of the project. We have been supportive of it for several years now."

But several years is a long time and so far, no proper arrangement has been reached. The Dock Board says it has yet to receive a formal proposal from RiverSphere officials. Meffert says it will soon be forthcoming.

"There is more movement than it would appear," says Meffert, somewhat mysteriously.

Meanwhile, Rick Abramson, president of the Delta Queen Steamboat Co., which occupies the wharf next door, is eager for the new neighbor to arrive.

"I'm baking cookies, waiting for them to come," says Abramson. "It's a shame for that building to lie dormant, as it does. I'm a fan of development and a fan of museums. I'd welcome them with open arms."

If Abramson is offering cookies, author John Barry is ready to buy the milk and get the party started.

"There's a lot of life in this project, even though nothing is resolved," he says. "I'm more optimistic about this project than I have been in years."

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