



RiverSphere plan requires \$60M over five years

by Deon Roberts
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Tulane University is looking for funding to build an ambitious \$60 million Mississippi River research and education center.

The university will kick off a capital campaign in three months to raise money needed to bring Tulane's RiverSphere project to life.

"We're optimistic. We know it's going to be rough," said John McLachlan, co-founder of RiverSphere and the director of the Center for Bioenvironmental Research at Tulane and Xavier Universities. "The economy is tough nationwide. Federal dollars ... are tight and are only going to get tighter."

RiverSphere will span nearly 8 acres at the foot of Henderson Street between the river and the Phase IV expansion of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. The site consists of the shuttered River City Casino and adjacent space under the Delta Queen steamship's terminal.

RiverSphere will feature state-of-the-art facilities that will allow researchers to study the river. It will be open to the public so visitors can look at exhibits derived from research happening under their noses. Biking paths and green spaces are also being considered to provide public riverfront access.

The concept for RiverSphere was born in 1998. Since then, the research center's land acquisitions and cash donations have grown to total assets worth roughly \$12 million, McLachlan said.

The project took a major step forward last year when Tulane acquired the land. A partnership of New Orleans businessmen donated 5.25 acres worth \$7.4 million, and Tulane bought the remaining land for about \$1.3 million at auction, said Douglas Meffert, program director for RiverSphere and a professor with the research center.

Tulane's challenge now is to find the money to take RiverSphere off the drawing board and into reality. The university will look at state, federal and private funding sources in hopes of raising the \$60 million over a five-year period.

"Where we really need to push in the next several years are the industry investments," he said. "More often than not it would probably be that a corporation would invest in the activities of a project studio that would generate the research knowledge and the intellectual property."

Sources of funding so far include \$1.5 million from the J. Aron Charitable Foundation Inc., \$2.5 million from the Weatherhead Foundation and roughly \$125,000 from the Coypu Foundation.

RiverSphere's fund raising will coincide with a university capital campaign in the third week of March, Meffert said.

"We're scaling it to have \$2.5 million by March, ramping it up to \$5 million the year after, \$15 million the third year and going up to \$60 million (in years four and five)," Meffert said.

RiverSphere will slowly begin to take shape this year with the installation of at least two and maybe three project studios, he said. The CBR's river research vessel, the Eugenie, will dock at the site this year, he said.

Also this year, Tulane and New Orleans Public Schools will begin a partnership under The Jason Project, a nonprofit that promotes hands-on scientific experience in schools.

Meffert is confident the funds will be raised.

"I think this is such a promising project for the city and the region, and I haven't met anyone that hasn't told me that it's a good idea," he said. "So I think it's quite achievable."

Between now and the capital campaign kickoff, an architectural and engineering team led by the New Orleans firm of Eskew+Dumez+Ripple is working on a master plan for the site, Meffert said.

The firm will take into consideration the possibilities offered for RiverSphere by the existing 80,000-square-foot casino property. Tulane owns the land under the building built in the 1990s for the defunct casino.

The firm also has reuse options for the 250,000-square-foot Robin Street wharf on the site, Meffert said. Tulane owns much of the land under the wharf.

Tulane has to work out long-term lease arrangements with the Port of New Orleans for the casino building and wharf and negotiate options with Delta Queen, McLachlan said.

"For all of this space, our intent is adaptive reuse where possible," Meffert said. "We want to utilize the existing structures as much as possible. Then in the long term ... we may build a new building or expand the existing ones."

RiverSphere was created by McLachlan and John M. Barry, who wrote "Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America." Barry's idea involved a museum about the Mississippi River so a river research component was eventually added to plans for RiverSphere, Meffert said.

One of RiverSphere's loftier ideas is installing turbines running from New Orleans to Baton Rouge to power the project.

RiverSphere was ranked as one of the top five riverfront development priorities a year ago in a brainstorming session led by the New Orleans Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau has also approved the idea.

"The addition of new cultural products to the city is always a great benefit to the local tourism industry," Stephen Perry, CVB president, said through a spokeswoman.