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### **River museum gets vote of confidence from port**

NEW ORLEANS — Tulane University's RiverSphere museum project came a giant step closer to reality today when the Port of New Orleans agreed to let the university develop the property at the Orange Street and Robin Street wharves.

With a total estimated cost of \$58 million, RiverSphere will be dedicated to research about the Mississippi River. Tulane officials say the first of four phases of development could be complete in fall 2006.

At its monthly meeting this morning, the port's board of commissioners voted to allow Tulane use of the building and wharf facilities at Orange Street, formerly the site of River City Casino. The university acquired the land beneath the building about a year ago, but will have to sign a long-term lease with the port for the right to use the building. Tulane may also use a portion of the property just upriver at the Robin Street Wharf, if the site's current tenant, Delta Queen Steamboat Co., moves or allows partial usage. Port officials said today they have had preliminary talks with the company.

Anthony Lorino, Tulane's chief financial officer and senior vice president for operations, said the university has earmarked \$5 million from the university's general fund for the first two phases of RiverSphere. He said Tulane will be on site in a temporary complex by fall 2006 and will complete part of the renovation of the former casino building by summer 2007.

"The RiverSphere project will allow the university to meet the needs we have now for research as well as fulfill our commitment to public education," Lorino told the board.

Once complete, RiverSphere will house exhibits on the river as well as research labs and studios, classroom and meeting space and a permanent stage for live performances.

Part of the research conducted at RiverSphere will involve the river's role in coastal land loss and how the waterway might be able to help stem the loss, said Doug Meffert, deputy director of Tulane's Center for Bioenvironmental Research. Also, as the seventh largest river in the world, the Mississippi is a good case study in the economics and ecology of a river system and how it affects communities, he said. University officials expect the center will become an international research lab.

Dock board member Bernard Charbonnet, who has been involved in promoting RiverSphere from the port's perspective, said the center will likely become one of the most visited places on the riverfront, adding to the numerous tourist attractions already in place. "It will also be a must-see place in academia," he said.

The third phase of the project totaling \$15 million will encompass about 55,000 square feet and include much of the laboratory and research space for the facility. There is no schedule yet for the final and largest phase of the project that will add another 100,000 square feet to the center and cost about \$38 million.

By A.J. Mistretta  
The Biz Network

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