

Bayfront plan: Just do it

The city hasn't had a signature accomplishment since the Ringling Bridge. The message from city residents appears unequivocal: Redevelop the bayfront.

Bill Waddill, managing director of the Sarasota Bayfront Planning Organization, has helped plan and develop 30 parks in his 31 years as a senior vice president, land planner and landscape architect at the Kimley-Horn engineering firm.

Of all those parks, Waddill says, he has never experienced a more extensive process — “by far”; never had more “amazing consensus” from the community; never had more public hearings; and never reached more people in the community (more than 50,000) than he has working on Sarasota's 52-acre Bayfront project.

That should send a powerful, undeniable, convincing message to the Sarasota City Commission members when they meet Thursday, Sept. 6 to consider three requests from the Bayfront planning organization.

There should be no debate. The time has come.

The planning organization is expected to ask commissioners to approve three items:

1) The organization's master plan, what Waddill calls “a living document” with a 50-year vision to implement.

2) Authorization to move forward on phase one, an estimated \$15 million to \$25 million, five-to seven-year transformation of the southern end of the 52 acres.

This would include tearing down and removing the Gulf-coast Wonder and Imagination Zone, or GWIZ, building (see box); building an extended pier into Sarasota Bay; a covered, walking promenade for outdoor events and strolling; pavilion; kayak launch; enhanced mangrove inlet; and a roundabout on U.S. 41 with a walking overpass, with both serving as a gateway to the new park.

3) Authorization for the city staff to negotiate with the planning organization for the creation of a public-private park conservancy that would govern the park's operations and activities.

None of these requests should be controversial. The residents of Sarasota are behind all of this, having spent five years and more than 200 meetings of residents and civic groups expressing what they want on the Bayfront. It's unequivocal.

What's more, Sarasota residents have waited long enough. For nearly 20 years, city commissioners and attendees of the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall have known the iconic structure has reached its useful end. Even after a \$20 million renovation in 2000 and subsequent minor renovations, it has become a beloved old car that just can't be outfitted to meet today's expectations.

In spite of that, previous city commissioners did not have the fortitude to adopt and move forward on consultants' recommendations in 2007 to create a new cultural arts park in the same location. That master plan took four years to create, and then it gathered dust on a shelf in City Hall.

Thankfully, three key people



Courtesy rendering

— restaurateur Michael Klauber, real estate entrepreneur Drayton Saunders and VisitSarasota CEO Virginia Haley — became the impetus to re-envision what could be on Sarasota's most underutilized bayfront land — 52 acres of mostly parking lot. They saw and believed that priceless acreage could and should live up to its location and be a signature, world-class landmark. They also understood that redeveloping it would be a once-in-a-50-year opportunity. Whatever was developed would stand for the next 50 years, just as the Van Wezel has. It would have to be right.

From their organization, Bayfront 20-20, to the creation of the Sarasota Bayfront Planning Organization and its impressive board of accomplished leaders, a fitting master plan has emerged. And it should continue on to implementation.

The big question, of course, is money. From where will the \$100 million come for the whole park — not including the cost of constructing a performing arts hall? From where will the \$15 million to \$25 million come to fund phase one?

Waddill's experience has taught him these projects require eight to 10 funding sources. Bradenton's \$6 million Riverwalk project took that many. State money will be crucial to the roundabout and walking bridge over U.S. 41, but that will take a minimum of five years. “The first part will take a heavy lift of philanthropy,” Waddill says.

“I'm optimistic,” he says. “We've had a number of people call to contribute” — including someone who has offered \$2 million.

Waddill also thinks phase one can be financed without saddling city taxpayers with bonded debt serviced via increased property taxes.

It's akin to the cliché, he says: “How do you eat the elephant? One bite at a time. Let's just take one step at a time.”

The time has come. Time for city commissioners to show vision and courage. Time to make a commitment to move forward.

Adopt the master plan; approve phase one; create the park conservancy. Just do it.

IN THE CASE OF GWIZ, PRACTICALITIES TRUMP NOSTALGIA

It's so easy to be nostalgic and sentimental when it comes to historic buildings. The urge to preserve is compelling.

Such is the case with the Gulf-coast Wonder and Imagination Zone, or GWIZ, building on the bay, formerly the original Selby Library.

Yes, it's an iconic Sarasota Architecture structure.

But there also are practical and economic realities. The most obvious is that it would take \$10.5 million of taxpayer money to make it habitable.

Also worth noting: When the Sarasota Bayfront Planning Organization asked Sarasota city residents what to do with the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall and GWIZ building, 25% of the 5,000 survey respondents said save the Van Wezel; between 1% and 2% (100 to 200 people max) said save the GWIZ building.

“It's blocking access to the bay,” says Bill Waddill, managing director of the Sarasota Bayfront Planning Organization.

In spite of this, the GWIZ building, of course, has its advocates.

Jim Gumpert, chairman of the Sarasota County Historical Commission, wants to repurpose the building to become a county history museum. Sarasota County needs space for its historic archives. He also told the *Sarasota Observer* he has access to \$10 million in private funding pledged toward the idea.

Sorry, perhaps use that \$10 million to “repurpose” the Municipal Auditorium for the museum and archives; don't put it on the water.

Gee whiz, as much as it hurts, practical realities are making a definitive case for the City Commission: Tear it down. Look ahead to the greater opportunity.



File photo

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“If we are to build a better world, we must remember that the guiding principle is this — a policy of freedom for the individual is the only truly progressive policy.”

Friedrich Hayek
“Road to Serfdom,” 1944

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