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COVER PAGE

Innovation Study Title **Creating Sustainable Places; Economically, Environmentally, Socially: A Case Study of Virginia Beach’s Aquarium & Owls Creek Master “Living” Plan**

Category Sustainability

Jurisdiction Name City of Virginia Beach, Virginia

City/County Manager James K. Spore

Population 440,000

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Creating Sustainable Places; Economically, Environmentally, Socially: A Case Study of Virginia Beach's Aquarium & Owls Creek Master "Living" Plan

"The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream--he awoke and found it truth."

-- JOHN KEATS, letter to Benjamin Bailey, Nov. 22, 1817

Intent & length of time enacted:

The twenty-year Aquarium & Owls Creek Master Plan programmed 1,200 acres of land surrounding the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center including adjacent outdoor recreational land and facilities with substantial frontage along beautiful Owls Creek and Lake Rudee in Virginia Beach, VA. Potential land uses share a common theme for inspiring conservation of shoreline and marine environments, and benefit the community in social and economic ways. The City of Virginia Beach Department of Parks and Recreation Open Space Preservation Fund and the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center Foundation forged a unique public-private partnership which funded the process that began with a Request for Proposals (RFP) in April 2010. The international master planning firm of EDSA, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, was contracted to work with the plan's Organizing, Executive, Leadership and Steering Committees and the community in the adoption of this exciting plan by fall 2011. This committee approach is unique because they are "living" committees that are coordinated for the master planning effort, but propose to continue their work through the Plan's 20-year implementation. At the heart of the master planning effort is Owls Creek, the unique water body extending landward from the Atlantic Ocean, the only such direct access in the developed Commonwealth of Virginia. The webpage and the related links explain the master planning process: www.vbgov.com/owls creek plan.

The Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center is the state's highest attended attraction of its kind, with more than 650,000 visitors annually, and a mission of conservation through education, research and sustainable practices. The Aquarium is managed through a public-private partnership between the City of Virginia Beach and the Virginia Aquarium Foundation with a \$10 million annual operating budget. The Department of Parks and Recreation manages the City's largest real estate inventory with over 290 sites covering nearly 5,900 acres of City-owned, operated or leased parks and recreational facilities with a year-2010 value of over \$323 million. With over 3.5 million people visiting the City's parks and recreation centers each year, it's departmental mission is to: Deliver parks, recreation programs and public spaces that reflect the priorities of our community; Support tiered levels of service that recognize the diverse needs of our community; and Focus on sustainability of core programs, services and facilities through efficient and effective business practices.

Seventy-two presentations about the plan have occurred to date and include three engaging public input and design meetings, stakeholder interviews and public outreach presentations. Since the initial focus area of the Aquarium & Owls Creek Master Plan is Recreation, the first opportunity for implementation will commence this fall with the Marshview Park Master Planning and implementation, creating an enclave of waterfront preservation for the community, just a short distance from a resort that welcomes 2.75 million visitors a year. Other focus areas in priority implementation order are:

Research & Technology, Education, Entertainment, Economic Development and Exhibits

Creating the Area Plan process now was essential to capitalize on real estate opportunities and partnerships, which will develop easier if plans are in place as a point of discussion. This plan integrates with the City's Resort Area Master Plan (2007/08) whereby linkages to the Aquarium were most recently studied.

Anticipated outcomes:

The RFP challenged potential planners to "Create a place that is nationally recognized as a center of excellence having to do with the coastal and marine environment, and which engage Programs, Facilities and Relationships." Our vision was to include parks with active and passive recreational opportunities; preservation areas, trails and outdoor exhibits which bring attention to the shoreline habitat and its changing environment; environmental conservation learning opportunities; overall pedestrian and multi-use connectivity throughout the study area; partnerships with higher education; marine science research facilities; multi-generational educational facilities and experiences; and an exhibit building to help Aquarium attendance grow from 650,000 to 1 million. Also, as a tourism-based community, we want to provide a several-day visit experience as well as extend the season for our 2.75 million annual visitors.

Actual innovative outcomes:

The new plan exceeded our expectations! Once the plan is implemented, the Aquarium & Owls Creek area will be an area of "urban evolution," serving as a cultural and scientific hub for Virginia Beach; adding alternative energy jobs and educational opportunities for students and scholars; increasing the exposure of Hampton Roads, and the Commonwealth of Virginia; attracting more grants and funding of all kinds and from a variety of sources; creating a year round tourist destination for Hampton Roads; supporting the convention center's group sales trade; and serving as an economic engine for the region and state. Specific innovative outcomes:

- Funded by a public/private partnership between a non-profit foundation for a city-owned and operated public aquarium and a city department of parks and recreation. The City of Virginia Beach's Open Space Preservation fund has already grown the City's parkland by 40% in just 10 short years of the City's 50-year history.
- Creates a central urban waterfront park for residents and tourists alike, unlike any other local amenity.
- Immerses people into the marine environment for a memorable experience that inspires environmental action. Gets people of all ages "back to nature."
- Demonstrates a new planning approach that could be a "lighthouse" process for other localities to follow; includes a hand-off from the professional planners to an Organizing Committee, Leadership Committee, Executive Committee and Steering Committee for implementation until the Master Plan has actually become a reality.
- Stakeholders joined a Steering Committee (55 members) in order to implement the Plan, not just create it via a planning process used by Exxon-Mobil executives for the six focus areas.

- Extends and builds upon an existing Oceanfront Resort Strategic Growth Area Plan, as a natural extension of the resort destination, yet a green transition to the rest of the City that is the most populous in Virginia.
- Encourages public, philanthropic and commercial investment in the future of Virginia Beach.
- Included in the Planning team a development specialist who inspired Aquarium Foundation members to institute fundraising programs that will garner investor participation.

Costs and or savings

The contract for the master plan was issued for \$198,500 to EDSA. The consulting team included economic impact consultants to gauge future economic gains.

Obstacles and results achieved:

- Listening - Engaging so many stakeholders was challenging but rewarding. EDSA planned to identify stakeholders, interview them one-on-one to gather baseline information and then draft a plan for public input. The plan was called "Aquarium & Owls Creek District Plan" and residents incorrectly sent out an alert that "redistricting" was going to be instituted. Freedom of Information Act requests were received and a public meeting was requested even before baseline information had been gathered. The planning team started in November 2010 and held its first public workshop in January 2011. Over 100 residents turned out for this first meeting and learned what the plan "was not," as well as what it "was." What started as an accusatory process, resulted in a positive relationship being developed with the community as a result of sincere and thorough communication by the planning team.
- Military Use Compatibility - Naval Air Station Oceana, the largest Naval air installation on the U.S. East Coast, holds permanent easements in the study area for certain incident potential zones called AICUZ (Aircraft Installations Compatible Use Zones). Their process for approval required a detailed plan be prepared so that Navy planners could rule as to whether or not the proposed activity is allowable. The plan was creatively adjusted as this feedback was received. For example, a research center was proposed with adjacent cabins for the researchers. The research center was approved but the cabins were not, although other approved areas were suggested by the Navy for the cabins. The military proved to be a true listener "at the table;" one that recognized the positive aspects of the Plan that would ultimately yield an enhanced quality of life for military service members residing in the community.
- Public School Compatibility - A marine science academy was envisioned for an elementary school adjacent to the aquarium building that would create an exciting living laboratory for the students. The school system asked that this be removed from the plan since their long-range planning focuses on these kinds of opportunities at the high school level.

New issues or unintended consequences realized as a result of the identified effort:

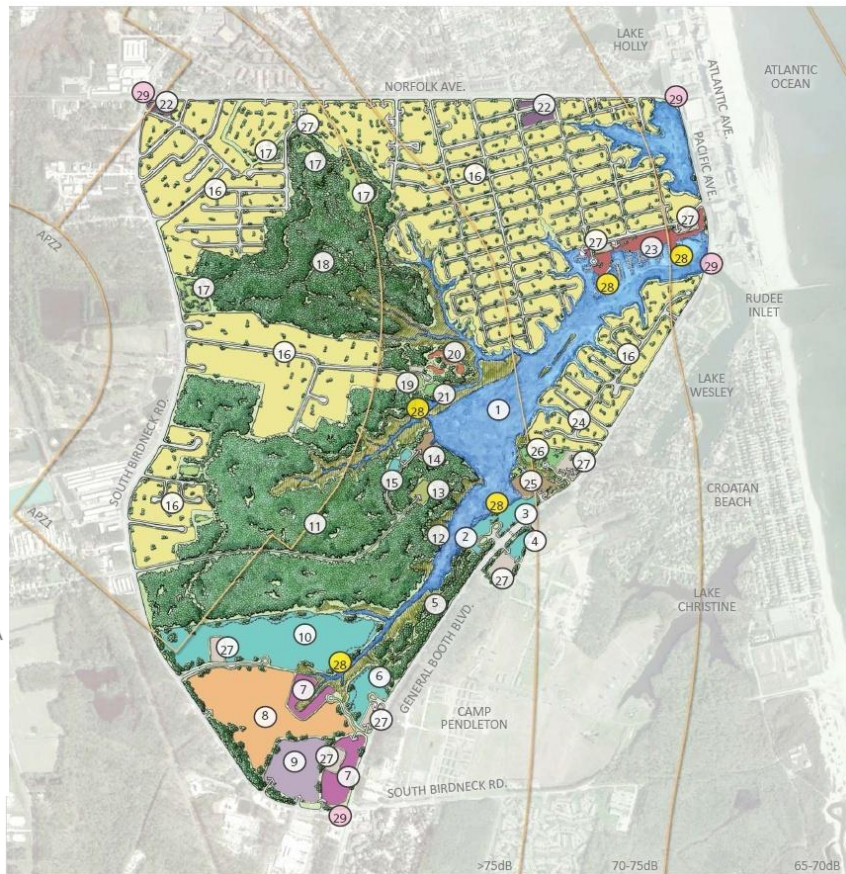
- The Seatack Community, a 200-year-old historically African-American neighborhood, submitted a list of items they wanted the City to address through this process although unrelated to the project. The planning team collected these items and shared them with appropriate city departments so they could be reviewed for action.
- The following actions, while not a complete surprise, illustrate how capturing the imagination of the community with a bold plan is like a snowball that starts out small with a few small successes and grows and grows:

- Local citizens that were engaged during the process have stepped forward to volunteer for Creek Clean-ups and to serve on future initiatives.
- The state military reservation offered to distribute Aquarium brochures.
- Ocean Breeze Amusement Park was purchased by former Six Flags owners and refurbished with a multi-million dollar investment.
- A local charter boat company is searching for a suitable vessel to serve as a trial water taxi to get more people out on the Creek.
- An effort is underway to designate Owls Creek as a “no discharge zone” for vessels.
- Philanthropic endeavors are already underway and are bearing fruit. A donor offered to fund a scientific fellowship at the Aquarium.
- Most importantly, local residents have joined together to create an on-going (Owls) Creek Keepers organization to preserve the creek and its watershed.

conceptual design preferred conceptual master plan

LEGEND

- 1 OWLS CREEK
- 2 EXISTING VIRGINIA AQUARIUM BUILDING
- 3 VIRGINIA AQUARIUM EXHIBIT BUILDING
- 4 WET-LAB RESEARCH / OFFICE / PARKING STRUCTURE
- 5 SKY LIFT / PARK PRESERVE
- 6 COASTAL SCIENCE PAVILION / CHILDREN'S CENTER
- 7 RETAIL / RESTAURANTS
- 8 AMUSEMENT / WATER PARK
- 9 SEATACK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
- 10 ADVENTURE PARK / ENTERTAINMENT AQUARIUM
- 11 NAVY PRESERVE
- 12 WATCHABLE WILDLIFE EASEMENT
- 13 TRAINING FACILITY (SPECIAL WARFARE)
- 14 DREDGE OPERATIONS
- 15 MARINE ANIMAL CARE CENTER (MACC)
- 16 EXISTING RESIDENTIAL
- 17 RECREATIONAL PARK
- 18 CITY NATURE PRESERVE (MARSHVIEW PARK)
- 19 RESEARCH CENTER
- 20 VISITING RESEARCHER CABINS
- 21 COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH FACILITY
- 22 EXISTING COMMERCIAL
- 23 ENHANCED RESORT TOURISM / MIXED USE / MARINA
- 24 PROPOSED RESIDENTIAL
- 25 BOAT RAMP
- 26 GREEN ENERGY RESEARCH FACILITY
- 27 PARKING
- 28 WATER TAXI STOPS
- 29 GATEWAY



Innovation Study Components:

1. Innovation/Creativity

- a. How did the plan improve the City of Virginia Beach?
 - Dovetails with the City of Virginia Beach’s Community for a Lifetime Strategic Plan and existing Strategic Growth Areas in the community including the adjacent Resort Area Plan.
 - Owls Creek watershed will be preserved by being included in this plan since it will be part of the City of Virginia Beach’s Comprehensive Plan. Development is sure to happen but through thoughtful planning the Creek will be protected for generations to enjoy.
 - Community will have better linkage to areas where residents/visitors can live/work/play. Removes reliance on cars as the preferred transportation mode. Gets the citizenry up and moving and involved in healthier lifestyles.
 - Participants will get an authentic experience through hands-on/minds-on experiences whereby they are exposed to information, programs, and experiences that cause them to think in new ways and change their behavior for the better.
 - Ensures that generations-old, established residential communities are not only preserved for the foreseeable future, but makes them an integral part of the vibrancy of this unique “place” that will be created by their proximity to and interaction within it.
- b. New technologies used in creating the plan:
 - Sent letters to every household in plan area using unique property identifier numbers for their addresses to make sure no one was left out.
 - HP TouchPads with Aquarium/Owls Creek Master Plan–themed applications built into them will be loaned to potential donors
 - QR codes on brochure and used FTP sites for large document sharing
 - Website (www.vbgov.com/owls creek plan) with all meeting minutes, and maps

New technology that can potentially be used in projects:

 - Interactive exhibits along the walking trails that identify such things as animal and botanic species or even Navy planes!
 - Ticket payment kiosks for easy pay options – buy one ticket that is scanned to get you everything from a bike rental to an aquarium entrance ticket to a water taxi ride.
 - Technology that takes away the barriers to being up close and personal with live animals so that both the visitors and animals are not harmed.
 - Geocaching as a way to communicate to visitors historical and environmental information unique to the Plan area.
- c. EDSA, the lead consulting firm, assembled an impressive team including landscape architects(local firm), engineering(local firm), philanthropic advisor, aquarium designers, economic and environmental(local firm) consultants. Visited the area seven times, steered the process, coordinated the public interviews, meetings and workshops. Delivered three technical memoranda that completed three major tasks as required contractually.

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2. Outcomes Achieved

- a. What customer/community needs and expectations were identified and fulfilled?
 - By working alongside the planners and City staff, citizens went from confrontational to cooperative. We listened to their ideas and reflected them in the plans so they now have ownership and pride in the outcome.
- b. Has service delivery been enhanced?
 - Residents will have access to an amazing number of resources as the plan unfolds. They will have an urban park just steps away from their homes. Programs will be available to them that tourists will have to travel from all over the world to attend.
- c. Did the initiative improve access to your government?
 - Citizens were actually able to participate in a design session where they drew on the maps to illustrate their ideas. They were pleasantly surprised, for example, to see the number of water taxis stops reduced as a result of their input. Online access to plans allowed review of materials prior to public meetings so citizens came with ideas and questions.
- d. Has the health of the community improved as a result?
 - A new 8 mile shared-use trail network, the South Beach and Maritime Trails, is the boundary for the 1,200 acre study area. The goal is to have residents and visitors moving around in non-traditional ways, even on rope bridges or zip lines, sky lifts or eco-friendly water taxis! With Parks and Recreations as a partner, healthy, outdoor activities will be a way of life and doing business in the Master Plan area.

3. Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

- a. What practical applications will be shared?
 - Taking a long term, yet implementable, view
 - Achieving multiple outcomes
 - Communication tools used in planning
 - Public-Private partnership development
 - Sustainable community growth
- b. How applicable is the plan to other local governments?
 - All communities say “We want to create a master plan that doesn’t sit on a shelf and gather dust.” Our implementation model demonstrates how to bring a master plan to life over time.

- All communities will benefit from a unique Master Plan process which also shows the community how the Plan can be funded.
- c. What results/outcomes will you share?
 - Online access to three technical memoranda containing the plans, SWOT analysis, financial viability, infrastructure needs, and funding its implementation.
- d. Include any applicable performance measures, if any.

As Jim Collins suggests in *Good to Great and the Social Sectors, A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great*, (2005) outcomes are not always as easily measurable in government and non-profits as they are in business. The plan itself is the desired outcome, but it receives an AAA rating if you consider its:

- Superior execution – Defined relative to the goal to “Create a place that is nationally recognized as a center of excellence having to do with the coastal and marine environment, and which engage Programs, Facilities and Relationships.” A community advocate said, “This presentation is nearly perfect. Many of the fears of the Seatack community are alleviated in this presentation and my plan is to give this presentation using most of the slides in a way that shows benefit and possible ways to collaborate and partner with city without intrusion into the community.”
- Distinctive impact – The City’s Envision Virginia Beach 2040 committee, having reviewed the plan, said, “You have done our work for us in the Owls Creek watershed.” The Mayor said, “That’s what I love about your team. You barely get finished with one project and you know you need to get moving on a plan for the future”. Lasting endurance – A children’s workshop was held as part of public input. The future residents told us what they wanted to see in this area. One 8-year-old said, “I want to swim with the animals.” Demographics were studied so that we know what future generations will want when they live/work/play. Standardized testing and computer usage has reduced the amount of time children are allowed time outdoors. According to the National Wildlife Federation, environmental education can help improve students’ motivation to learn, reduce disciplinary problems in the classroom, build students’ critical thinking and social skills, and bolster students’ performance in other areas of the curriculum, including math and science, so they will be prepared for the future workforce.

4. Innovation Study Presentation

- a. The innovation study presentation will include:
 - PowerPoint to serve as an overarching guide
 - Video of the Owls Creek area today and the virtual metamorphosis of what it will become through the Plan into the future
 - Interactive group activity – “Word Rose”
 - Handout materials about the Steering Committee’s implementation process, Aquarium & Owls Creek Master Plan Executive Summary & Sample of Major Gifts White Paper