

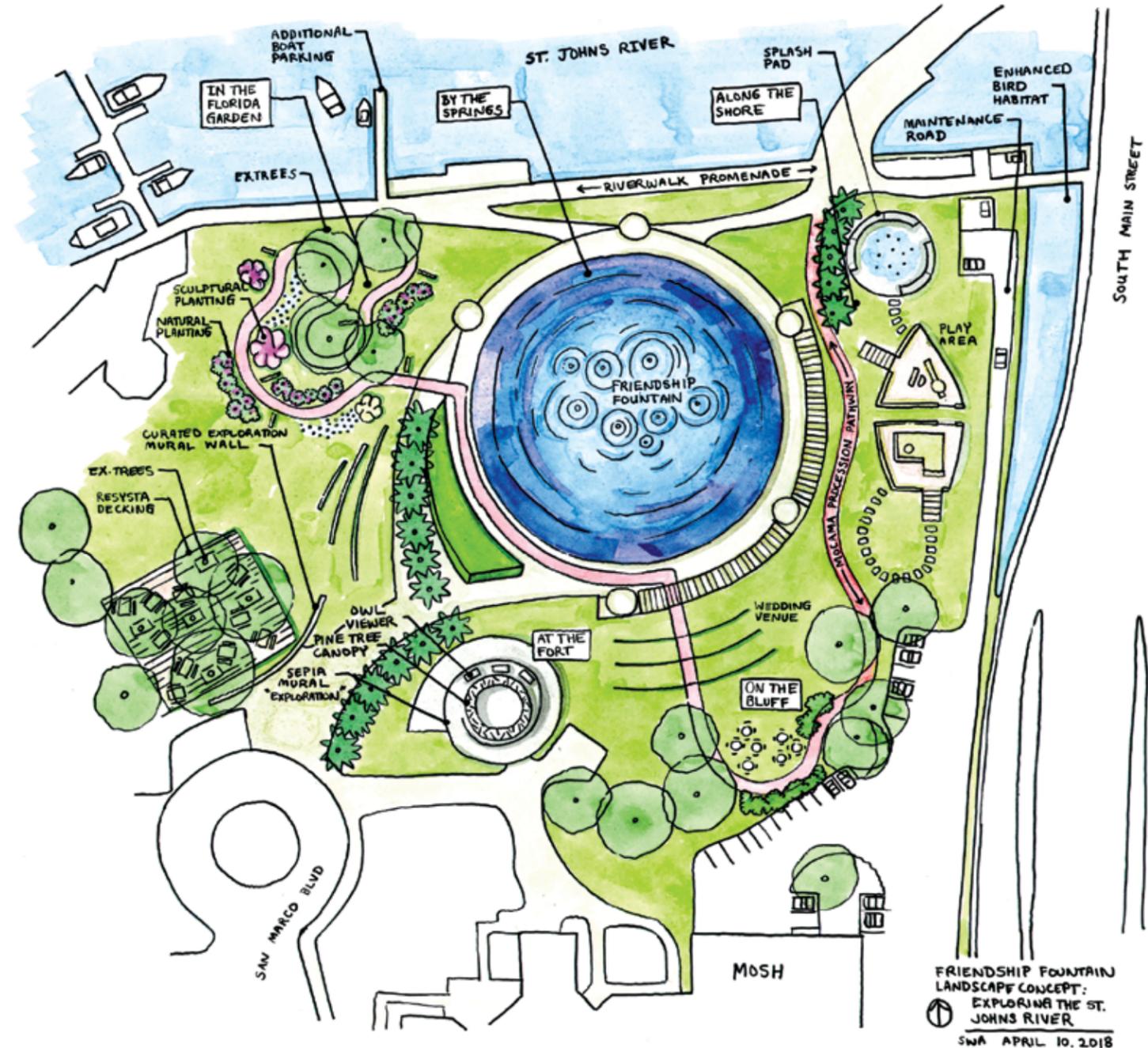
take me to the river

Whether you call them ‘nodes’ or ‘themed pocket gardens,’ the Downtown waterfront activation project is getting started with a plan (and money in the budget) to revive Friendship Fountain into a destination.

BY LILLA ROSS
FOR J MAGAZINE

NODE: FRIENDSHIP FOUNTAIN PARK

SWA GROUP IN COLLABORATION WITH DIA - HAND DRAWING BY JENNIFER SAURA/SWA GROUP



Friendship Fountain is an icon of the Downtown riverfront whose fortunes have been down as often as they've been up. It's been a place to stop during a stroll on the South-bank Riverwalk or a visit to the nearby Museum of Science and History — and the backdrop of countless family photos. But never a destination.

But that's about to change, if City Councilwoman Lori Boyer has anything to do with it. She envisions Friendship Fountain as a multimedia entertainment venue that tells the story of the St. Johns River.

ST. JOHNS RIVER ACTIVITY NODES

AS MANY AS FIFTEEN 'THEMED POCKET GARDENS' WOULD CREATE ACCESS POINTS ALONG THE ST. JOHNS RIVER DOWNTOWN WHILE SHARING JACKSONVILLE HISTORY AND INFORMATION.



Friendship Fountain Park is the linchpin of Boyer's plan to activate the Southbank and Northbank Riverwalks with a series of about a dozen thematic, interactive pocket parks.

Whether all of it becomes reality depends, as usual, on whether existing seed money can become a real public investment in the city's greatest asset.

The initiative, begun three years ago by the Jacksonville chapter of the American Institute of Architects, "is to fundamentally change the perception of the city. To make it cohesive not fragmented," said Chris Allen, director of design at the Haskell Co.

At the time, the economy was rebounding, and several proposals were on the table to redevelop the riverfront. All of them were great ideas, Allen said, but the architects thought the big picture was getting lost.

They decided that the Northbank and Southbank Riverwalks could be a unifying element. But they needed to create a sense of place with strong visual elements and activities to engage people while incorporating the river and information about Jacksonville.

Their concept is for a string of what they call "nodes" at about a dozen places along the riverfront. Boyer calls them "themed pocket gardens." Neither term really captures what they want to see happen.

Each node would tell visitors something about Jacksonville, a bit of history, like the Great Fire or the Dixieland Park; a little culture, like its art and music; or a

taste of what shapes the city's identity, like the river, the military and sports.

They also would help people access the river, serving as a water taxi stop, a kayak launch or a marina. And, they would be interactive, engaging the body, the mind, the imagination. A magnet to draw people Downtown.

Great concepts ... but will they happen?

Boyer, who is heading up the city's waterfront activation effort, has championed AIA's ideas and made them her own, talking them up at every opportunity. She is finishing her second term on the City Council and is term-limited.

Who will take up the cause? Her successor on the council? A nonprofit, less hamstrung by city policies and practices? Or, perhaps, Boyer in another role. The councilwoman is reticent about the future but says she is firm in her commitment to activating the river and Downtown.

The Downtown Investment Authority has hired SWA Group in Los Angeles, a landscape architecture and urban design and planning firm that specializes in waterfront redevelopment, and HR&A, which specializes in economic development, to work with the Haskell Company to develop a Riverwalk master plan.

A preliminary design plan was expected this spring, but SWA submitted designs only for nodes at the Friendship Fountain and the Times-Union Performing Arts Center.

The others are still only ideas at key points along the river:

- Cummer Museum and Gardens
- Brooklyn
- McCoys Creek (at the Florida Times-Union building)
- Main Street
- Hogans Creek
- Fairfield (by the Matthews Bridge)
- Hendricks Point (by the Fuller Warren Bridge)
- Riverplace Tower/Treaty Oak Park
- Lone Star Sailor statue on the Southbank Riverwalk
- The District

Boyer has brainstormed for over a year with architects, landscape architects and artists, looking at how other cities have activated their waterfronts and different ways Jacksonville could make its riverfront unique.

But all that creative energy has hit the hard realities of practical implementation — experts uncomfortable with unconventional projects and the glacial pace of city government.

THE FOUNTAIN PAST AND FUTURE

Friendship Fountain Park is going to happen. There's \$1 million in the budget and another \$1 million to come next year for renovations to the fountain, upgrades to sound and lighting and new video capabilities.

JEFF DAVIS



Opened in 1965, the \$1.7 million Friendship Fountain quickly became a popular Downtown attraction.

You might see it as a strategic tease to show taxpayers what is possible with some ideas and investment.

It's not the first time the fountain has been renovated.

Architect Taylor Hardwick, famous for the Haydon Burns Library, also designed the fountain and park. When the \$1.7 million fountain was dedicated in 1965, it was the world's largest and tallest, 200 feet in diameter, holding 500,000 gallons of water and pumping up to 6,500 gallons of water 100 feet into the air every minute. It became hugely popular with residents and tourists, a picturesque icon of the consolidated Bold New City of the South.

The fountain was refurbished in 1985 and continued to be a popular stop for tourists. But in the early 1990s, the original 14-acre park was cut in half to accommodate the construction of the new Acosta Bridge. The Diamond Head Lobster House was in the path of the ramps for the new bridge and had to be demolished. In compensation, the city cut the park in half and allowed a new restaurant, Harbormasters, to be built on the site. It became River City Brewing Company in 1993.

The fountain operated until 1999 when age and corrosion shut it down. In 2001, the city spent \$1.3 million in upgrades, adding six light towers with synchronized colored lighting. But a year later a power surge blew out the computer controller and lighting. The damage was repaired, and Friendship Fountain was in its glory for Super Bowl XXXIX in February 2005. But two months later, two of its three pumps failed. Neither parts nor money was available to replace the 40-year-old equipment, so the fountain limped along on one pump.

In 2010, the city undertook a major \$3.1

DON BURK (FOUNTAIN), WILL DICKEY (BOYER)

million renovation of the fountain and park, upgrading the lighting and sound system and adding landscaping and hardscape to the park. And that's the Friendship Fountain we know today.

But you have to know it's there. The city icon is easy to overlook, tucked away as it is behind MOSH. And parking is limited, especially at peak hours for the museum and adjacent River City Brewing Co. The upcoming Riverplace Boulevard "road diet" might improve its visibility with improved access and signage, but people still need a reason to seek the park out.

The Friendship Fountain Park of the future would become a destination, a place to spend the afternoon with the kids, or an

evening watching video project into the mist of the fountain or a light and music show synchronized with the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts across the river.

The plan calls for an outdoor amphitheater, a large picnic area and green space shaded by trees and lush with native plants.

The pump house would be turned into a vantage point to see the river with an exhibit of historical images and maps. "The building unfurls like a scroll unfurling the story of the exploration of the St. Johns," Boyer said.

The playground is inspired by the Princess Diana Memorial Playground in Kensington Gardens that has a Peter Pan theme with a pirate ship, Indian tepees and a crocodile. The Jacksonville adaptation would have splash pad, a Timucuan hut, a French galleon, a la Jean Ribault, and a giant alligator to play in and on.

"It's an extraordinary playground, and we could do something like it that would be worth coming to," Boyer said.

The centerpiece of the park, of course, is Friendship Fountain, a new improved fountain with the latest multimedia technology for synchronized light and music shows or videos projected into the mist. That's done in many places, most famously at the waterfront Fountain Roshen in Vinnytsia, Ukraine, which on summer evenings has mesmerizing performances of "Swan Lake" and "Peter Pan" projected into the mist of the fountain.

A CULTURAL NODE

Across the river at the Times-Union Performing Arts Center, the pocket park would



Lori Boyer has been working on a project to activate the St. Johns River in Downtown for three years.



Crowds gathered at Friendship Fountain in 2011 following a reopening ceremony after the city spent \$3.1 million to restore the fountain and park.

celebrate the art and cultural heritage of Jacksonville. Its design is still being worked out.

The initial concept is to have four gardens, each designed around one of the four movements of the Florida Suite, composed by Frederick Delius as a reflection of the time he spent living in an orange grove near Jacksonville and being inspired by the St. Johns River.

But it's also an opportunity to showcase music by Jacksonville's African-American composers like Charles Singleton, who wrote the lyrics to "Strangers in the Night," and James Weldon Johnson, who wrote "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing."

Boyer is especially excited about live streaming movies and concerts on the CSX facade that could be watched from an outdoor amphitheater. Food service could be provided from the kitchen at the Performing Arts Center.

The new technical capabilities at each node could be synchronized into a light and music extravaganza that plays off the Acosta and Main Street bridges that could be viewed from the Northbank and Southbank or from a boat in the river.

None of this has been finalized, Boyer said, "but it gives you an idea of where we're heading."

Enhancements to the fountain and a new focus at the Performing Arts Center would give the Riverwalks a wow factor and create momentum for activating the river. But with Boyer leaving the Council, it will only succeed if other City Council members and city leaders double down on their commitment to making something happen on the riverfront.

THE PROSPECTS

Gerdo Aquino, CEO of SWA, is the landscape architect working on the design. He lives in Los Angeles now, but he grew up on the Westside. He remembers hanging out at The Jacksonville Landing with his friends from Ed White High School.

He and his mother, who still lives on the Westside, sometimes walked a loop from the Landing, across the Main Street bridge to the Chart House for lunch, then back to the Northbank via the Acosta.

Those days along the St. Johns River left a deep imprint on Aquino.

"I'm very interested in place-making in the public realm where cities are creating an identity around some kind of water element. It could be a tiny creek or a big river like the St. Johns," Aquino said. "I want people to grasp the scale and intensity of nature

in the middle of the city. To feel the river first and the city second. The opportunity is in plain view to create a vibrant public life. It's really exciting to be working on the public waterfront in my hometown. It's a dream."

Guy Parola, operations manager for the Downtown Investment Authority, said he sees the nodes as "destination drivers" that will come on board as developments along the riverfront take shape.

"These are big ideas, big concepts with multiple activation levels," Parola said. "These are big and bold and wonderful."

Aquino said he has been impressed with the city's commitment to the project.

"I know Jacksonville, so I was the Number One skeptic," Aquino said. "But there is a strong sense of optimism about Jacksonville. We are looking for things that will make it a reality, being realistic but dreaming big enough to see if all the parts can fall into place. So far things are moving along pretty well. If Jacksonville can pull off this world-class waterfront, it's going to be the city to visit not the city to pass through. It will be a destination city."

LILLA ROSS is a Jacksonville freelance writer who worked as a reporter and editor at The Florida Times-Union for 35 years. She lives in San Marco.

JON FLETCHER

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1 Riverside Avenue
Jacksonville, FL 32202

904.359.4318

wecanhelp@jacksonville.com