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ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AWARD (TIE)

Fort Myers Downtown River Basin

Much-needed environmental project provides economic and social boost to downtown

by **Kirsten O'Donnell**
City of Fort Myers

Pay a visit to **Fort Myers' historic Downtown River District**, and you're likely to see residents and visitors gathered around the city's River Basin, a picturesque water feature extending from the Caloosahatchee River into the heart of downtown. However, few of the folks snapping selfies around the sparkling basin are aware of the important environmental purpose it serves.

The Caloosahatchee is the lifeblood of the City of Fort Myers. The river brought tourism and industry to the region in the 1800s and 1900s, sparking the city's development, but eventually leading to a decline in the river's quality. Today, the Caloosahatchee is listed as an impaired waterway by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.



A 10-year study (1993-2003) by the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) noted that the River District's stormwater runoff contributed to the Caloosahatchee's nitrogen levels. Fort Myers' downtown has been urbanized for more than a century, long before current stormwater treatment requirements existed. More than 80 percent of downtown is composed of impervious surfaces, which caused rainfall to run directly into the Caloosahatchee.

For years, the city sought a method to treat this runoff. Simultaneously, city leaders knew that growth was dependent on developing the underused riverfront and attracting businesses. The water quality solution would not only need to address stormwater drainage but also the treatment of runoff from future redevelopment sites.

The solution came in the form of the 1.5-acre Fort Myers River Basin. The basin provides stormwater mitigation for 15 acres of downtown, while also bringing 1,200 linear feet of new waterfront property into the River District.

The Fort Myers River Basin treats urban stormwater runoff by intercepting pollutant loads into the Caloosahatchee. Picturesque fountains and underwater



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aerators improve the water quality. Helpful bacteria control algae levels. A hidden weir structure divides the basin from the river, controlling discharge while making the basin appear fully connected to the Caloosahatchee. Stormwater is also filtered through percolation as it travels through the basin's sand bottom. Combined, these features reduce nitrogen loading to the river, allowing the city to meet the water-quality criteria established by the SFWMD.

Calculated reductions from pre-project pollutant load include total suspended solids (reduced 82 percent), phosphorous (reduced 80 percent), total nitrogen (reduced 54 percent) and biological oxygen demand (reduced 87 percent). Since the basin's completion in December 2012, the city has reported an annual total nitrogen reduction from the project of 90 lbs./year.

The environmental impact of the basin is difficult to dispute, but the benefits extend beyond environmental stewardship. Decades of dredging and filling had separated Fort Myers' historic downtown from the Caloosahatchee. The River Basin symbolically reconnects Downtown Fort Myers with the riverfront, providing public access and connectivity to the Caloosahatchee. The scenic basin has also become a focal point for downtown gatherings and events.

With the creation of an additional 1,200 linear feet of new waterfront property, the city's core is now ripe for development opportunities. The basin provides a catalyst for attracting restaurants, retail shops and more to an otherwise sparse area of

downtown. The expected regional economic impact of this development stands at \$67 million and up to 870 jobs for local economy.

The city is beginning to reap these rewards. Mainsail Lodging and Development is preparing to break ground on a long-sought downtown convention hotel that will hug the River Basin, providing economic opportunity as well as added parking, storefront retail and waterfront restaurants. The hotel project will also provide for expansion of the Harborside Convention Center and construction of a waterfront amphitheater, facilitating Fort Myers' growth into a premier business and conference/convention location.

The City of Fort Myers River Basin is adaptable to any water-side community in Florida with urban stormwater runoff issues. The basin proves that water quality improvement projects can be achieved in a downtown location. Funding avenues for the basin are accessible to many urban areas. More than half (60 percent) of the \$5.7 million budget came through a combination of Community Redevelopment Agency tax increment revenues and grants from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The River Basin project provides a solid model for an infrastructure investment that brings about a healthier environment, a richer economy and an enlivened heart of the city.

Kirsten O'Donnell is the public relations coordinator for the City of Fort Myers. **QC**



PHOTO BY STEWART NELSON, FLORIDA LEAGUE OF CITIES

The Environmental Stewardship Award was presented to officials from the City of Fort Myers during the Florida League of Cities 91st Annual Conference.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CITY OF LAUDERDALE-BY-THE-SEA

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AWARD (TIE)

Lauderdale-By-The-Sea Shores Up Its Coastline

Efforts include planting sea oats and staghorn corals

by Mark Brown and Steve d'Oliveira
Town of Lauderdale-By-The-Sea

LAUDERDALE-BY-THE-SEA
Broward County
Pop. 6,138

Lauderdale-By-The-Sea is a small beachfront town located on a barrier island just north of Fort Lauderdale. Like most coastal communities in Florida, its beaches face erosion threats from constant ocean waves and currents, not to mention powerful hurricanes and tropical storms.

These threats are especially acute for Lauderdale-By-The-Sea, as the shoreline is the town's main line of storm defense. Because the beach, ocean and our reefs are also the engines that drive the tourism-based economy in **Broward County**, we have no greater responsibility than to protect these valuable natural resources for the businesses, residents and marine life that depend on them.

To this end, the town embarked on an innovative Coastal Environmental Protection Program.

After Tropical Storm Sandy caused severe beach erosion in 2012, the town planted 60,000 sea oats to build up its

dune system. In 2014, Lauderdale-By-The-Sea entered into a partnership with **Nova Southeastern University's** oceanographic program in **Dania Beach** to transplant more than 2,500 staghorn coral fragments from a nursery to the town's reefs.

Coral reefs help mitigate severe wave energy during hurricanes and tropical storms, while dunes are critical for protecting beachfront property from powerful storm surge that can easily push destructive ocean waves onto State Road A1A and other beachfront roads.

SEA OATS

Planting sea oats is not uncommon. The Coastal Environmental Protection Program stands out because seedlings were planted along the entire 2.4-mile stretch of Lauderdale-By-The-Sea's beach. It took five years and the efforts of more than 1,000 volunteers, but now a healthy, natural and self-sustaining dune system is in place.

These efforts helped add more than three feet of new sand to the beach at minimal cost and without the environmental risks posed by dredging sand from offshore and pumping it onto the beach. These dunes will continue to grow as the sea oats capture more wind-blown sand.

One of our first steps was to partner with the **Youth Environmental Alliance**, a **Hollywood** nonprofit organization that brought in volunteers to do the planting,



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF LAUDERDALE-BY-THE-SEA

including many school children from Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Several major corporations made generous donations and invited their employees and families to help with the plantings, making this effort a true public-private partnership.

The Town Commission initially appropriated \$10,000 to purchase sea oats, and received a \$5,000 grant from Broward County.

STAGHORN CORAL

Lauderdale-By-The-Sea is one of the few municipalities in the United States with a living coral reef located within 150 yards of the beach. Besides protection from hurricanes, reefs provide critical habitat for tropical fish, spiny lobsters, sea fans, sea urchins and federally protected corals.

Staghorn and elkhorn, the two major coral species responsible for building Florida’s 5,000-year-old reefs, are threatened by climate change, pollution and other human-made factors.

Under the partnership program with Nova Southeastern, more than 2,500 staghorn fragments from the university’s coral nursery were planted off Lauderdale-By-The-Sea in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The town paid the project’s \$59,000 cost.

“We’re a small town of 6,000 residents, but our efforts can easily be duplicated in other coastal cities,” **Mayor Scot Sasser** said. “We all need to be mindful of what we can do to protect the environment.”

In addition to increasing the local staghorn population, the program’s research included evaluating different attachment techniques and planting colonies in higher densities.

“The outplanted staghorn coral population offshore Lauderdale-By-The-Sea is doing quite well,” said **Dr. David Gilliam**, a Nova Southeastern faculty member and marine biologist who implemented the staghorn project for the town.

“The colonies are growing and creating new colonies through natural asexual fragmentation,” Gilliam said. “A diverse reef community is developing which will promote coral reef restoration. The town should be applauded for its commitment to conservation and meaningful stewardship of its coastal and marine resources.”

Mark Brown is vice mayor of the Town of Lauderdale-By-The-Sea, and Steve d’Oliveira is the town’s public information officer.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CITY OF LAUDERDALE-BY-THE-SEA



PHOTO BY STEWART NELSON, FLORIDA LEAGUE OF CITIES

The Environmental Stewardship Award was presented to officials from the Town of Lauderdale-By-The-Sea during the Florida League of Cities 91st Annual Conference.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF MELBOURNE

CITY CITIZENSHIP AWARD

Play Melbourne!

A unique approach to promoting parks and recreation inspires a community to Get Out and Play

by Cheryl Mall
City of Melbourne

A great, hands-on way to get citizens directly involved in improving their communities is to encourage their regular use of city parks, playgrounds and recreation centers. Parks filled with children playing, for example, enliven neighborhoods, become true community assets and are less likely to be abandoned to crime and neglect.

Understanding that citizen participation is the key to sustaining thriving parks and recreation programs, the **City of Melbourne** launched a robust branding, outreach and sponsorship program to better engage with local business, organizations and schools. Since the “Play Melbourne” initiative was launched in 2015, participation in programs and events has dramatically increased, inspiring Melbourne’s residents to “Get Out and Play” and take advantage of their city’s many parks and recreational opportunities.

First, the city rebranded the department from the passive “Leisure Services” to the more active “**Play Melbourne Parks & Recreation**.” The city invested in professional photography and video production, most notably creating a “Melbourne: Get Out and Play” video that promoted play and showcased the many recreational opportunities available. The city created a new



Facebook page, dedicated “Play Melbourne” website, signage, uniforms and print materials.

In addition, “Play Melbourne” included important programming changes, facilities upgrades, expanded marketing efforts and a major push to improve community partnerships and develop mutually beneficial sponsorship opportunities. Since the program’s inception, more than 150 partnerships have been established.

“The City of Melbourne Parks & Recreation department has done a fantastic job with their Play Melbourne initiative by providing opportunities for businesses and organizations to partner with the city on great events for our community,” said **Denise Piercy**, president of Running Zone Inc. and executive director of the **Running Zone Foundation**. “We appreciate our partnership with the City of Melbourne and enjoy working with them to help improve health and fitness in our local community.”

To increase park use by families, Play Melbourne developed programs for children and became an active member of Brevard Public Schools Partners in Education program. The partnership was so successful that the school system named Play Melbourne its Nonprofit Partner in Education in 2017.



MELBOURNE
Brevard County
Pop. 80,419



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CITY OF MELBOURNE

“Play Melbourne Parks & Recreation’s representative attends functions, offers solutions, shares resources and builds relationships with more than two dozen schools in our district,” said **Debra Foley**, outreach supervisor for the school system. “Schools win and so does Play Melbourne as it gains exposure for its programs, finds avenues to deliver messages directly to parents and engages with the community on a deeper level.”

To create a stronger sense of ownership of its parks, the city launched a “Pickets for Parks” program that allows a business, family, individual or organization to purchase a custom engraved picket for use in the decorative fencing around a park’s playground. Within five months of launching Pickets for Parks, 50 pickets had been sold, raising \$5,000.

“The Play Melbourne program combined effective branding, marketing and outreach efforts to effectively communicate the ‘Get Out and Play’ message, resulting in increased attendance at events, sponsorship dollars raised and partnerships

formed,” said **Kevin Briski**, Melbourne’s director of Parks, Recreation and Golf. “It also energized our staff, encouraged them to become more proactive and further engaged our residents and visitors.”

Play Melbourne is now a recognized brand in the community and beyond, and Melbourne’s residents are taking advantage of the many recreational opportunities available to them. Most importantly, they understand that to be engaged with “Play Melbourne” means they can play an active role in ensuring their city’s health, well-being and continued high quality of life.

“We are extremely proud of our community’s response,” said Melbourne **Mayor Kathy Meehan**. “Our citizens and businesses take pride in this city and truly believe in getting involved and giving back.”

Cheryl Mall is the public information officer for the City of Melbourne.



PHOTO BY STEWART NELSON, FLORIDA LEAGUE OF CITIES

The City Citizenship Award was presented to officials from the City of Melbourne during the Florida League of Cities 91st Annual Conference.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF OLDSMAR

CITY SPIRIT AWARD

Oldsmar's Centennial Celebration Builds Community

100 years rolled into one

by Deborah Vitraelli
City of Oldsmar



A wise man once wrote, “Taking the time to build community, to get to know your people, will have long-lasting benefits.” This was the mantra of the **City of Oldsmar’s Peoples Centennial**, which was celebrated throughout 2016.

Most cities celebrate their centennial based on the year they incorporated, which for the City of Oldsmar would be 2037. But Oldsmar always likes to do things a little differently – and with reason. The Oldsmar Peoples Centennial brought the city and community together to embrace 2016 as the 100th anniversary of the founding of Oldsmar by **Ransom Eli (R.E.) Olds**, the inventor of the Oldsmobile and REO automobiles.

In early 2015, the city approved the creation of a task force that was charged with coordinating and managing what would

become the City of Oldsmar’s Peoples Centennial. The task force believed the centennial would provide the perfect opportunity to recognize and promote local organizations to residents. The Oldsmar Historical Society, Woman’s Club of Oldsmar, Friends of the Oldsmar Library, Olds Club of Florida and other groups embraced the opportunity to work side by side with the city.

Oldsmar Peoples Centennial’s mission statement was “to help our citizens learn and honor our history and present community through fun, family oriented activities and venues, resulting in our community contributing to a tangible legacy as we move in the future.” Appropriately, the task force selected the Oldsmar Historical Society as the primary beneficiary of any fundraising revenue.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF OLDSMAR

Excitement was building in the community in anticipation of what would become a historic year.

In December 2015, a self-guided Christmas tour blended together history and the upcoming centennial. To build the initial coffer, commemorative centennial items were produced and sold, including a custom coverlet that was marketed for everyone to “wrap yourself in history.” The library requested old-fashioned Oldsmar recipes, which were compiled into a centennial cookbook to benefit the Friends of the Oldsmar Library. Custom centennial ornaments sold out immediately, proudly hung on residents’ Christmas trees.

2016 arrived.

The Oldsmar Peoples Centennial kicked off with the first “Fifth Friday” celebration, one of three musically themed events presented to the community for free. An old-fashioned Dinner Dance and Oldsmobile Car Show along the main street in front of City Hall helped the community embrace its past. The Historical Society and Friends of the Library presented a guest speaker series to educate citizens on the history of Oldsmar. These events showed the community how working together can be truly beneficial.

A commemorative postal cancellation stamp was created in partnership with the local U.S. Postal Service office. On a special date, residents could have a postcard or letter hand canceled with the stamp, which depicted the **Oldsmar Centennial Station**. The Legends of Rock Centennial Concert was the final musical event – a true celebration of the many events held throughout the year.

No centennial is complete without a time capsule. Elementary school students provided mementos that will be sealed for 50 years. To retrieve their contributions, these young participants received a “Time Keeper Certificate” to present during the 2066 capsule opening. The sealing ceremony was held during the city’s Annual Tree Lighting Ceremony – serving as the final event for the 2016 Oldsmar Peoples Centennial.

Although this special year has come and gone, it will always be remembered as a celebration that impacted the city and its future. The memories created will have long-lasting benefits. It resulted in building community to showcase Oldsmar’s true City Spirit.

Deborah Vitraelli is the marketing specialist for the City of Oldsmar.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CITY OF OLDSMAR



PHOTO BY STEWART NELSON, FLORIDA LEAGUE OF CITIES

The City Spirit Award was presented to officials from the City of Oldsmar during the Florida League of Cities 91st Annual Conference.