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Chattanooga shows beauty of having a bolder vision

By Bruce Ritchie

DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

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David Ramsay says that when he left his hometown of Chattanooga, Tenn., in 1980, it was a city that was "beginning to fall in on itself."

A decade earlier, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had labeled Chattanooga the "dirtiest city in America." Vagrants, boarded-up downtown storefronts, and burned-out warehouses marked the city's downtown, Ramsay said.

"You wouldn't go downtown at night for any reason," said Ramsay, who is chairman and chief executive officer of SunTrust Bank in Tallahassee.

But now Chattanooga's air is cleaner and the city is a national showcase for downtown redevelopment. Its Tennessee Aquarium with an IMAX theater, Tennessee Riverwalk, art district, hotels, condominiums, restaurants and nightlife mark a city that has turned itself around.

Last week, Ramsay returned to the city with a flock of Tallahassee leaders to see how Chattanooga has remade itself. They hoped to bring ideas back to Tallahassee for use in planning the Capital Cascade Trail and redeveloping Tallahassee's downtown.

Seven-mile stretch proposed

The planned trail, also known as the Capital Cascade Greenway, would extend about seven miles from Leon High School to near Lake Munson. About \$70 million from the local 1-percent sales-tax revenue has been budgeted for the projects along the trail, including reconstruction of Franklin Boulevard to reduce flooding.

At the heart of the project lies the closed Cascades Park on South Monroe Street about a block from the state Capitol. Cleanup at the park, a hazardous-waste site, is expected to start in 2005.

The city and county's Blueprint 2000 agency has been drawing a conceptual plan for the greenway and park. In addition to stormwater projects to reduce downstream flooding, the greenway could include parks, a recreational trail, benches, sculptures, ponds, picnic areas and other water features.

Ramsay, who moved to Tallahassee in 1995, said he's become interested in how the city and county can improve Franklin Boulevard and reduce flooding. He has also been returning to Chattanooga every year to visit relatives and has watched the city grow.

Chattanooga and the state of Tennessee cleaned up the air by creating a local air-pollution agency. The closure of some steel mills in the area also helped reduce air pollution.

The city had created a plan for revitalizing its downtown and riverfront by 1987. In 1988, the nonprofit RiverCity Co. began buying land and getting permission from landowners to install a seven-mile system of parks and recreational trails, said Jim Bowen, vice president of the RiverCity Co.

Construction of the \$45million aquarium, paid for by foundations and corporations, also began that year, Bowen said.

More than a million people per year have visited the aquarium since it opened in 1992. Construction of new hotels, museums restaurants and downtown followed the aquarium - and the redevelopment hasn't stopped.

The RiverCity Co. now is moving forward with a new \$120-million development plan that includes a saltwater addition to the Tennessee Aquarium.

A bold vision

Last week, 33 Tallahassee government officials, business leaders and civic activists visited Chattanooga, and Ramsay said he thought most were impressed by what they saw.

Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker said he told the visiting Floridians that his city revitalized itself by involving the public and by planning in a big way.

"I talked to them about vision," Corker said. "What I have learned is the bolder the vision, the more energy and resources come to the table to make it happen."

Chattanooga shows what can be done with any greenway corridor, whether it's alongside the expansive Tennessee River or along Tallahassee's St. Augustine Branch, which flows through the Capital Cascades Greenway, said Dale Allen, southeast region director of the Trust for Public Land in Tallahassee.

"I think the power of a visit like that is to get everybody thinking big," Allen said. "Not just the citizens who want to think big, but the elected officials who need to think big but are often constrained by budgets and immediate concerns."

Chattanooga's thinking was "way out of the box" when civic leaders began building the aquarium but they set out to accomplish their vision, said Erin Ennis, managing director of Advantis North Florida in Tallahassee.

"I think that is one thing we struggle with in Tallahassee - it takes years and years and years to accomplish what are very good ideas," Ennis said.

Tallahassee Mayor John Marks, who also went on the trip, said his city is not far behind other cities in redeveloping its downtown areas.

He pointed out that The Tennyson condominiums on North Monroe Street are being built, and hotels to attract convention visitors are being planned at the Civic Center and on Gaines Street.

"If that is not big, then I don't know what is," Marks said.

Ramsay said he's concerned that by the time flood control structures along the Capital Cascade Trail are paid for, there won't be enough money left for parks like those in Chattanooga to attract people.

But he also said that the city and county officials who went on the trip seemed convinced that his former hometown could serve as a model for Tallahassee and its greenway.

"This can be a very positive part of our downtown and part of our community," Ramsay said. "It can have a major impact on how we play and how people become a part of our community."

TOPIC LINE

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