

GEORGIA AQUARIUM WILL ANCHOR DOWNTOWN TOUR PACKAGE

David Pendered - Staff
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The Georgia Aquarium has galvanized an effort to combine marketing plans for Atlanta's top tourist attractions in hopes of attracting more visitors and convincing them to stay longer.

Promoters are creating tour packages that will offer discounted admission to the aquarium, the Imagine It children's museum, the World of Coca-Cola museum and tours of CNN and the Georgia Dome.

The plan is to have the packages ready to sell by March, with more venues to be added later. Proposed prices from each attraction are due Friday, said Wilma Sothern, a vice president of Central Atlanta Progress who is coordinating the program.

The key is the aquarium, which will have 55,000 sea creatures and 9.9 acres of exhibit space. It's scheduled to open later this year as part of the city's emerging entertainment district around Centennial Olympic Park.

"Atlanta has lacked a blockbuster attraction, the thing you can't leave without seeing, and the aquarium will provide that," said Ken Bernhardt, the regents professor in the marketing department of Georgia State University's J. Mack Robinson College of Business.

"But Atlanta never has packed all the nice destinations we do have to present people with a whole series of things they can do when they come to Atlanta."

Bernie Marcus, a co-founder of Home Depot who donated \$200 million to build the aquarium, said the marketing campaign will eventually include attractions adjacent to the aquarium as well as venues such as Zoo Atlanta and Stone Mountain Park.

Marcus also said Atlanta's pro sports teams --- including the Atlanta Falcons, owned by Home Depot co-founder Arthur Blank --- may be part of the effort.

"Arthur Blank is anxious to cross merchandise the Atlanta Falcons. The Hawks, the Braves, we're all interested in joint [marketing] programs. I want to sell people on the zoo while they're in the aquarium, and I want to sell them on CNN," Marcus said.

Tourism and conventions are big business in Atlanta. Visitors invested more than \$8.75 billion in the local economy in 2003, according to a report by the Travel Industry Association of America. The average length of stay is 3.3 nights, a figure Marcus thinks will increase by a day once the aquarium opens.

"We've never had an attraction good enough for people to want to stay over," Marcus said. "This will be a real magnet."

A SNAPSHOT OF SOME OF THE NATION'S TOP AQUARIUMS

When aquarium insiders think of American success stories, they usually turn to the gleaming trident of the Shedd (Chicago), Monterey Bay (California) and National (Baltimore).

"Those would be the first three to come to mind, without a doubt," says Jane Ballentine, public affairs director of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA), an industry group with 211 members, including 38 aquariums. Big, expanding and budget-balanced, each has helped turn their respective neighborhoods into a tourist mecca by drawing more than 1 million visitors a year.

The Georgia Aquarium may one day join this elite fraternity of fish facilities. The \$200 million ship-shaped facility under construction at Centennial Olympic Park --- is scheduled to open by year's end.

When it does, it's expected to have an early advantage: It will debut as a privately funded institution that does not have to pay off construction debt.

While funder Bernie Marcus, co-founder of Home Depot, has kept wraps on what the aquarium will feature and how it will operate, this look at a half-dozen aquariums (three major, three regional) gives some insight into how these facilities run, what they offer, and how they manage to keep customers returning.

FLORIDA AQUARIUM

www.flaquarium.org

Location: Tampa, Fla.

Opened: 1995

Annual Attendance: 600,000

Size: 1 million gallons; 200,000 square feet

Major Exhibits: "Shark Bay," a 125,000 gallon exhibit in the "Sea Hunt" gallery; a 500,000 gallon coral reef with 2,000 fish.

What's New: "Explore A Shore" is a two-acre, \$1.2 million outdoor play area for kids. Opened March 2004.

Revenue: \$9.2 million

Expenses: \$9.3 million

Endowment: \$250,000

Top Salary: \$153,000 (CEO Thom Stork)

Public support: Taxpayers kick in \$4 million-\$7 million annually to finance construction debt. Spokeswoman Andrea Davis said the city of Tampa contributes "a declining annual subsidy" --- most recently \$750,000 --- toward operations.

Bottom line: Florida Aquarium was hampered from the beginning by over-optimistic attendance projections. It still loses money, but it's been on the rebound, thanks in part to former director Jeff Swanagan, who helped turn around the facility before being hired to run Georgia Aquarium. It's also had a positive effect on downtown's economic climate. The aquarium was a pioneer in turning around the warehouse district now known as Channelside, which features shops, restaurants and the St. Pete Times Forum, home to music acts, professional hockey and arena football.

MONTEREY BAY AQUARIUM

www.mbayaq.org

Location: Monterey, Ca.

Opened: 1984

Annual Attendance: 1.8 million

Size: 2.1 million gallons; 322,000 square feet

Major exhibits: Outer Bay, Kelp Forest, Monterey Bay Habitats, Splash Zone

What's New: Ocean's Edge galleries (shoreline habitats of Monterey Bay) opens Memorial Day weekend; "Sharks: Myth and Mystery" special exhibition, opened April 2004. The aquarium recently released a great white shark it had rescued and held in captivity for a record six-and-a-half months. With the shark behind glass, museum attendance increased 30 percent over the same period the previous year.

Revenue: \$45.1 million

Expenses: \$36.6 million

Endowment: \$48 million

Top Salary: \$142,864 (Executive Director Julie Packard)

Public support: No government support for operations.

Bottom line: As in Baltimore, the Monterey Bay Aquarium helped turn a decaying area --- Cannery Row, of John Steinbeck fame --- into a tourism engine that still hums decades later. Unlike Baltimore, it was built entirely with private funds (from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation).

NATIONAL AQUARIUM

www.aqua.org

Location: Baltimore, Md.

Opened: 1981

Annual Attendance: Nearly 1.5 million in 2004.

Size: 2.3 million-plus gallons

Major Exhibits: 1.3 million gallon dolphin exhibit; 335,000 gallon coral reef exhibit.

What's New: An expansion, "Animal Planet Australia: Wild Extremes," focusing on the Northern Territory of Australia, is slated to open later this year. It will offer 100 different species, including freshwater crocodiles.

Revenue: \$30.5 million

Expenses: \$30.6 million

Endowment: None, but the aquarium has a separate foundation to help with fund-raising during its current expansion.

Top Salary: \$242,952 (Executive Director David Pittenger)

Public support: Local counties contribute about \$200,000 annually in operating costs. The state provides approximately \$100,000 toward admission for students. City residents committed \$2.5 million toward infrastructure improvements.

Bottom Line: The city funded most of the \$21.3 million construction cost. Other public contributions included \$2.5 million in federal funds and \$7.5 million from the sale of Friendship Airport (now Baltimore-Washington International) to the state of Maryland. The aquarium was one of the first cultural attractions in the city's Inner Harbor revitalization project.

SHEDD AQUARIUM

www.sheddaquarium.org

Location: Chicago, Ill.

Opened: 1930

Annual Attendance: 2 million

Size: 5 million gallons; 430,000 square feet

Major Exhibits: The four-level Oceanarium features beluga whales, Pacific white-sided dolphins, Alaska sea otters and harbor seals in a re-creation of a Pacific Northwest coastal environment. The Australian lungfish named "Granddad" is more than 70 years old, having arrived at the aquarium in 1933. The Shedd says he's the oldest aquatic animal in a public aquarium in the world.

What's New: The \$45 million "Wild Reef" expansion, which opened in 2003, includes 25 sharks in a Phillipine coral reef setting. A new temporary exhibit, "Crabs!", opens next month.

Revenue: \$51 million

Expenses: \$36.7 million

Endowment: \$131.9 million

Top Salary: \$434,467 (President/CEO Ted E. Beattie. He also received \$101,835 in benefits in 2003.)

Public support: State and local governments contribute about 14 percent of the annual operating budget.

Bottom Line: In the early days, when it still got its saltwater shipped by train from Florida, Shedd Aquarium helped put Chicago on the map as a premier cultural destination. The 1991 opening of its Oceanarium was seen as the catalyst for putting new emphasis on the south lakefront, now a major greenspace area.

SOUTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM

www.scaquarium.org

Location: Charleston, S.C.

Opened: 2000

Annual Attendance: Approximately 428,000

Size: More than 500,000 gallons; 93,000 square feet

Major Exhibits: More than 60 exhibits focus on five major regions of the Appalachian Watershed: the Mountains, the Piedmont, the Coastal Plain, the Coast and the Ocean. The Great Ocean Tank is the largest exhibit in the Aquarium. It holds over 335,000 gallons of water and contains over 300 animals.

What's New: An Amazon exhibit opened March 2004.

Revenue (2004): \$6.6 million

Expenses (2004): \$7.1 million

Endowment: \$150,000

Top Salary: \$139,000 (Executive Director Christopher Andrews. Andrews became director of the Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco last month.)

Public support: Gets approximately \$100,000 annually from city accommodation tax pool.

Bottom Line: According to a 2002 report, the aquarium supports an estimated 6,605 jobs in the region with an economic impact in 2001 of \$23 million.

TENNESSEE AQUARIUM

www.tennis.org

Location: Chattanooga, Tenn.

Opened: 1992

Annual Attendance: About 850,000

Size: Once a new expansion opens April 29, it will be approximately 1.1 million gallons and 190,000 square feet.

Major Exhibits: The world's largest freshwater aquarium is dominated by River Journey, which includes sections such as the Appalachian Cove Forest, Tennessee River Gallery, Mississippi Delta and Rivers of the World. The facility includes an Imax 3D movie theater.

What's New: The \$30 million Ocean Journey aquarium is a 700,000 gallon saltwater facility featuring sharks, barracuda, giant Japanese spider crabs and reef fish.

Revenue: \$14.9 million

Expenses: \$15.9 million

Endowment: \$0

Top Salary: \$195,431 (President Charles Arent)

Public support: No government support for operations.

Bottom line: A catalyst for downtown revitalization, the aquarium has spawned an estimated \$1 billion in development, according to the Chattanooga Downtown Partnership.

GEORGIA AQUARIUM

www.georgiaaquarium.org

Location: Atlanta

Opens: Late 2005

Annual Attendance: 2.1 million projected to attend in the first year

Size: Five million gallons; 430,000 square feet

Major Exhibits: Philanthropist-founder Bernie Marcus won't talk yet about the marquee creatures and exhibits created by PGAV, the St. Louis-based company that has designed attractions for SeaWorld and Busch Gardens. Public documents show the aquarium is seeking fairly standard fare so far: hammerhead sharks, piranhas and barracuda, among others. "We are going to have more animals, more fish in this aquarium than they have in any aquarium in the world," Marcus says.

Expenses: Not yet known. Considering it will be roughly the same size as Chicago's Shedd Aquarium, Georgia Aquarium's annual operating budget could be in the \$30 million - \$35 million range, and maybe more. Still to be decided is how the fund-raising community finds approximately \$20 million over the next five years that Marcus says will be needed to fulfill the aquarium's education and research missions.

Revenue: Before the first paying customer steps inside, the facility has instituted FishScales, a fund-raising program similar to the sale of Olympic bricks in Centennial Park.

Endowment: A nonprofit organization, Georgia Aquarium Inc., will own and operate the aquarium. A board of directors will be named. The board will have to raise the endowment and build expansions down the road.

Top Salary: \$256,000 (Executive Director Jeff Swanagan)

Public support: The state granted the aquarium a sales-tax exemption on construction materials valued at \$5 million.