

AQUARIUM ANCHORS URBAN AREA POISED TO EVOLVE

By [DAVID PENDERED](#)

Shelly Stevens closed her restaurant across Luckie Street from the Georgia Aquarium in 2003 because the lights and water kept shutting off without warning while the aquarium was being built. The effort to keep Dugan's open next to the fury of a fast-track construction site was just too great.

Stevens' eatery reopened this week to serve up its famed wings and burgers in a cafe overlooking the aquarium's parking deck. Stevens has her fingers crossed that her decision to keep paying the lease during the lean times will pay off, although she has no expectations that aquarium visitors will queue up at her door.

"We're a little place and we serve good food, and we think we'll cater to [aquarium] employees and the people who live in the lofts in the neighborhood," Stevens said.

The Georgia Aquarium, which opens to season pass-holders Monday, is expected to bring a few million visitors a year into downtown Atlanta. Bernie Marcus, the aquarium's benefactor, said one reason he approved a site in a rough part of town was to help lift the distressed urban core by creating jobs and attracting crowds with money to spend.

The neighborhood that visitors will see around the aquarium may not be as polished as Marcus would prefer for his grand opening. There still aren't many places to eat or shop. Windows on several empty storefronts in the blocks surrounding the aquarium display "For Lease" signs.

The area northwest of the Georgia Aquarium still has the gritty feel of a decayed industrial district that had served as Atlanta's freight depot since before the Civil War. There are several fenced-off parking lots and a handful of brick buildings with "For Sale" signs tacked on their fronts. One vacant building has a banner reading: "Experience Atlanta's New Restaurant Row."

The explosion of shops and restaurants that transformed downtown Chattanooga when the Tennessee Aquarium opened in 1992 hasn't erupted here. Then again, Chattanooga had a 20-year master plan to leverage its aquarium into an economic catalyst to revitalize its downtown. And now more than 100 stores, bars, restaurants and an Imax theater have infused the neighborhood surrounding that city's recently expanded fish tank.

Egbert Perry isn't surprised at what appears to be a sluggish response to open shops and restaurants in hopes of profiting from aquarium visitors. Much of the land that can be developed near the Georgia Aquarium is owned by companies such as his, The Integral Group, that have been planning big projects since long before Marcus announced the downtown site for his aquarium. (The first announced site was at Atlantic Station, in Midtown).

Perry expects to start construction next year on a 200-unit condo building, with retail on the ground floor, on a site overlooking the aquarium.

"The aquarium never intended to be all things to all people," Perry said. "It will be a huge economic generator. But retail follows [residential] rooftops, and I think the retail will start to be evident in 12 months, when the residential projects are under construction and they include retail on the lower levels."

The city of Atlanta is in the process of helping developers improve the neighborhood around the aquarium. But money that was initially approved in March has yet to be provided.

Atlanta's development agency, the Atlanta Development Authority, recommended the city issue up to \$40 million in bonds to subsidize construction of new shops, three hotels, an office tower, housing and the new World of Coca-Cola Museum.

The Atlanta City Council approved the bond sale in June, but it was delayed and the council changed the deal in September to include additional funds that will support Mayor Shirley Franklin's effort to help the homeless.

The bond package is following a normal course and is on schedule to be sold by year end, said Greg Giornelli, president of the development authority.

David Marvin's company, Legacy Property Group, is one of a few developers who hope to capitalize on the Georgia Aquarium. Legacy, which is to receive about \$5 million from the city's bond issue for two hotels and a restaurant-retail center, has been a player downtown since before the Olympic Games, building the Embassy Suites hotel and Centennial Park West condominiums, which overlook the park. Legacy has started renovating an office building into the Glenn Boutique Hotel, at Marietta and Spring streets, and hopes to start next year renovating a building it bought in 1999 with plans to make it a dot.com office tower.

"I think it would be advantageous if all the improvements to be undertaken around the aquarium were open when the aquarium opens, but that just hasn't proved to be workable," Marvin said. "I've met with Bernie [Marcus] and shared our plans and sought his input and kept his organization apprised about our schedule. I wish we were a better neighbor to the Georgia Aquarium by being open."

The anchor tenant of Marvin's planned retail-restaurant center, just across Marietta Street from the aquarium's parking lot, is Metrotainment Cafe. Marvin said it will be a sports bar hosting remote broadcasts for 790 The Zone sports talk radio. The building's interior has original brick walls and stone work, and this week Mark Dagostino, Marvin's property superintendent, was checking out work in the building he remembers as the Carson furniture store.

Dagostino has been renovating buildings along Marietta Street for more than a decade. While the area may not be the entertainment destination for the aquarium spillover crowd that some had hoped, he marvels at the neighborhood's evolution.

"It used to be terrible," Dagostino said. "We had to sleep in the buildings to keep the 'urban outdoorsmen' from taking the copper pipes. You couldn't turn your back on your tools or they'd disappear. But with every year that goes by, you see more and more people walking by, even at night. And this area used to be a ghost town."

Shopkeepers near Centennial Park have high hopes the aquarium visitors will boost their businesses.

"I look forward to it being real busy here because people will be walking around before and after they go to the aquarium, and CNN Center will have too many people," said Steven Walker, a cook at Just Around the Corner, a hamburger stand at the corner of Spring and Marietta streets. Walker flips burgers and fish in a building that has been just slightly renovated since it served in the 1930s as a Standard Oil gas station.

The owners of Layfield Motors Service have seen lots of change around their business, which opened in 1924 near its current location on Luckie Street, next to Dugan's. Calvin Watts, a co-owner, said Layfield has outlasted the creation of Centennial Park, which eliminated many businesses that used his repair shop. Watts' big worry about the Georgia Aquarium is possible traffic congestion, but he is looking at the bright side.

"We'll probably get a lot of people wanting to get their oil changed so they can get free parking while we work on their car," Watts quipped.

At Dugan's, Shelly Stevens is equally amazed at the area's turn-around in the two years her restaurant was closed. Dugan's still carries the badges of being a real urban pioneer — razor wire circles the rooftop to thwart burglars and the garbage bin is in a cage to fend off dumpster divers. But Stevens did not want those badges noted.

"It really is dramatically different. Now, when you see people running, they're jogging, not running away from somebody."