

Tampa Bay Times

Tampa takes first step toward redeveloping Riverfront Park

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TAMPA — City Hall is taking the first step on what is expected to be a three-year, \$10.5 million makeover of Julian B. Lane Riverfront Park.

"We're going to make some changes," Mayor Bob Buckhorn said of the 23-acre park, just south of Interstate 275, across the Hillsborough River from the David A. Straz Jr. Center for the Performing Arts.

"It's long overdue. It's dated. It's showing its age," the mayor said. "It's not really functional, and it really doesn't showcase the river like it should."

The city this month issued an invitation to architectural or engineering firms interested in developing a master plan for the park. That will include making sure the public is involved during the planning and coordinating changes with the city's new InVision Tampa plan.

The deadline for proposals is April 4.

People who live near or use the park will have a say about its future, Buckhorn said.

"Before we do anything at Riverfront or any of the other parks, we're going to have an ongoing dialogue with the people who are affected by it," he said.

In Riverfront's case, he said, that includes the University of Tampa, Tampa Preparatory School and the West Riverfront neighborhood.

"As close as we are to the park and as much as we love the park — we named our association after the park — we really want to be a part of anything that's going on," said Ruth McNair, who for 20 years has served as president of the West Riverfront Neighborhood Crime Watch Association.

City Council member Frank Reddick, whose district includes the area, said residents most worry about losing public access to the park.



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Mayor Bob Buckhorn wants Julian B. Lane Riverfront Park to be more active, accessible and appealing, serving as a companion park to Curtis Hixon along the water.

Buckhorn is not talking about that, but Reddick said residents "just keep hearing snippets every now and then about what he might like to see or what he wants to see," and that creates uncertainty.

Buckhorn said the city is working to engage residents in a discussion about what's next and what's best for the park.

"We're doing exactly what we told council that we were going to do, which is go out and get a design professional, start the community discussion and get community input," he said.

Buckhorn said he does not have a plan for the park, but wants to make it more active, accessible and appealing.

The city's recently completed InVision Tampa plan says Riverfront Park "should be re-imagined and re-purposed to create a more active companion" to Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park.

"The park should be program-driven, with active uses relevant to the community and a growing downtown population," the plan continues. "The park should be made relevant to as many people on as many days of the year as possible by incorporating different types of active and passive activities."

Those activities, according to the plan, should include water access and boating, community recreation like pick-up soccer or football games, food and other vendors and a "feature playground with splash pad."

In the meantime, Buckhorn does say there are a few things he wants to change.

For starters, there's Laurel Street, which currently cuts the park into two big pieces.

Buckhorn would like to reroute Laurel so that it skirts the northern edge of the park, next to I-275. He figures the realignment could effectively increase the park's usable space by 5 to 7 acres.

Also likely to be changed are the park's large earthen mounds, grassy swales and humps, which Buckhorn has called "alien space mounds" and "a bunch of bumps."

But other elements, like the Boys & Girls Club and the Stewards Foundation, which conducts community rowing programs, aren't going anywhere.

"They are good anchors for that park," Buckhorn said, and "important anchors" in the lives of children.

And last week the mayor repeated that he does not plan to try to bring a waterfront restaurant to the park.

Last year, he floated that idea, but he said he no longer thinks it's a good fit.

Reddick, who has criticized the mayor for saying too much before neighbors have been consulted, remains wary of the sheer scope of the project.

"They can do a lot with \$10 million," he said. "That's what scares me."

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>> **Fast facts**

The man behind the park's name

Dairy rancher Julian B. Lane served as mayor of Tampa from 1959 through 1963. As mayor, Lane presided over the start of Tampa's move toward racial integration of public facilities, including lunch counters,

hospitals, schools and Lowry Park. During his tenure, Tampa also was hit by a flood, a big freeze and violent strikes against the local bus line and telephone company. Lane added 200 firefighters to the Fire Department, fought to keep MacDill Air Force Base open and appointed a committee to study the proposed construction of Tampa Stadium. He died in 1997 at age 82.

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