

Downtown Tampa ready to take the next step

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It's almost Thanksgiving and we all have a lot to be thankful for.

In the next few years, we'll reach critical mass in downtown Tampa with the new Tampa Museum of Art, the new Children's Museum, the new Tampa Bay History Center, the Florida Aquarium, plus the St. Pete Times Forum, the Tampa Theatre, Plant Museum and the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center.

No other Florida downtown, and few in the country, will match the variety and quality of what we will offer residents and visitors.

At the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, we just celebrated our 20th anniversary and our 10 millionth patron. We're owned by the City of Tampa but run independently – a prime example of a great public-private partnership.

The St. Pete Times Forum and TBPAC frequently lead our respective categories in worldwide attendance, and we anchor the two ends of downtown.

We're in a very strong position.

St. Petersburg calls itself "the city of the arts" and they do have a lot to be proud of – but no more than Tampa.

Sarasota calls itself the "cultural coast." It's beautiful, it's cultural – but no more than Tampa.

The difference, and perhaps I'm biased because of my profession, is that they've done a better job of branding or advertising what they have. They've forced the comparison into the conversation. (And, by the way, I'm not suggesting that we need a grandiose, bragging slogan. I was here for America's Next Great City.)

At some levels, most of them in the chattering class, we do have an inferiority complex about what we have.

I can tell you that I've made a personal crusade to contact every politician, every reporter, every bureaucrat, every letter writer who ever says, "There's nothing to do downtown."

"There's nothing to do downtown." That sounds like a whiney teenager.

And it's just not true. And the more often that falsehood gets repeated, the more ingrained it becomes and repeated again. (And it's not what our friends and neighbors tell their guests about Tampa, either. They brag about their zoo, their aquarium and their performing arts center.)

For example, just at TBPAC last year we had more than 3,600 events, including classes at our Patel Conservatory. We had more than 700 curtains and more than 620,000 people. And this season we will draw closer to 800,000 people to downtown Tampa this year. There are times we have all five of our theaters busy, with dance, drama, cabaret, Broadway and class showcases. At the end of this year, our Carol Morsani Hall will be named number three in attendance for venues under 5,000 seats.

“There’s nothing to do”?

This season, we’ll provide three of the biggest blockbusters in the country: the Radio City Music Spectacular featuring the Rockettes, Jersey Boys, the story of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons in its only Florida engagement, and Disney’s The Lion King.

“There’s nothing to do”?

Last time the Lion King was here, we attracted visitors from 48 states, four continents and four countries. Those three shows will draw more than 110,000 patrons each!

It’s the same for most of the downtown attractions. We provide destinations, there’s a rush and then it’s quiet. To the casual eye, perhaps we don’t look busy. But that not an accurate picture.

Those are people who want to eat out before a show, and maybe have coffee and dessert afterward. They’re people from outside our area who want to make a weekend of arts and entertainment. At the TBPAC alone, we have a \$100 million annual economic impact.

I just chaired an arts marketing conference in New York with representatives of the 40 largest PACs in North America. Your performing arts center is an industry leader in booking touring Broadway and diverse entertainment, in arts management, in education, in new technology. People in hundreds of other big cities wish they had what we have here: a thriving, vital performing arts center that has balanced its budget for the last dozen years.

What is true is this: We don’t have masses of people wandering around downtown looking for something to do. It’s not pedestrian friendly. We need to fix that.

While I always try to accent the positive, here are a few other things we **don’t** have:

- A way for residents to park once and visit numerous venues.
- A way for hotel and convention guests to ride public transportation to Channelside or other downtown restaurants and then to an arts and entertainment venue and then back to the hotel without worrying about getting stranded.
- A comprehensive (**and I stress comprehensive**) calendar that would provide one-stop shopping for interested patrons.
- A continuous program with downtown merchants and restaurants to help us get the word out on downtown arts and entertainment activities. One thing I do notice in St. Petersburg is that you can’t walk three shops without seeing a poster for an

upcoming event. I don't think they have more events; they have more posters and more awareness.

- A belief that arts patrons – and I say this as a Bucs ticket holder and a former member of the Outback Bowl board – are at least as valuable as sports patrons.
- Effective use of the riverwalk as a destination and as a conduit for pedestrian traffic. (I've said this before: Look at what San Antonio has done with a glorified ditch in Texas; we have a real river and a bay.)
- Effective and collaborative arts and entertainment advertising. Lowry Park, MOSI and the Aquarium pioneered this years ago. Can't we all do more along these lines?
- An outreach program to the thousands of new urban pioneers moving into the downtown core.
- A central ticketing site that would advertise and facilitate sales.
- A sense of place ... even when you get to downtown Tampa, there's no sense that you've arrived. A continuous banner program, striking and effective wayfaring signs, public art – all those would mark downtown as a destination, not just an exit off the interstate with some tall buildings.
- A real advertising and branding campaign. This is a hard thing even in one company, and we have hundreds of stakeholders. But we have treasures downtown and an inexpensive, but a comprehensive, branding campaign would help patrons discover them – both those that exist, and those on the way.

There are lots of energetic, dedicated people working on many of these things including the Tampa Downtown Partnership.

Together we need to work faster, better and more efficiently if we are to be successful. And we need to build a larger team.

I mentioned I just came back from NYC from an arts conference. I also went there to run the New York Marathon for the fourth time. On the back of my finisher's medal, there's a quote from Alberto Salazar, the great marathon champion. It says a marathon is "a triumph ... over all limits."

Even a marathon of 26.2 miles starts a step at a time. Let's take that next step.