

WATERSIDE ON AGENDA IN TODAY'S STATE OF CITY

By Harry Minium

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NORFOLK

City officials have set a timeline for deciding what to do with Waterside, the aging waterfront marketplace that decades ago helped spark the revival of downtown.

In his State of the City address today at the Norfolk Waterside Marriott, Mayor Paul Fraim will announce plans for a 10-month-long effort to seek public input. The City Council will make a decision on Waterside's future early next year, he said.

The city has already begun mailing surveys to seek input on the ailing facility, he said. The surveys also will be on the city's Web site (www.norfolk.gov) by Sunday, and they will be placed in libraries, mailed to civic leagues and sent to churches.

Fraim said two focus groups will be held this fall, followed by two public meetings that will also report the survey results. "People feel very strongly about Waterside," the mayor said. "They want a voice in deciding its future."

He said he has no preconceived notions of what Waterside should become, but he will insist that it continue to be controlled by the city and open to the public.

Fraim, a council member since 1986 and mayor since 1994, is being challenged in the May 4 election by three candidates – Councilwoman Daun S. Hester, council critic Daniel Montague, and Old Dominion University student Ryan Cooper.

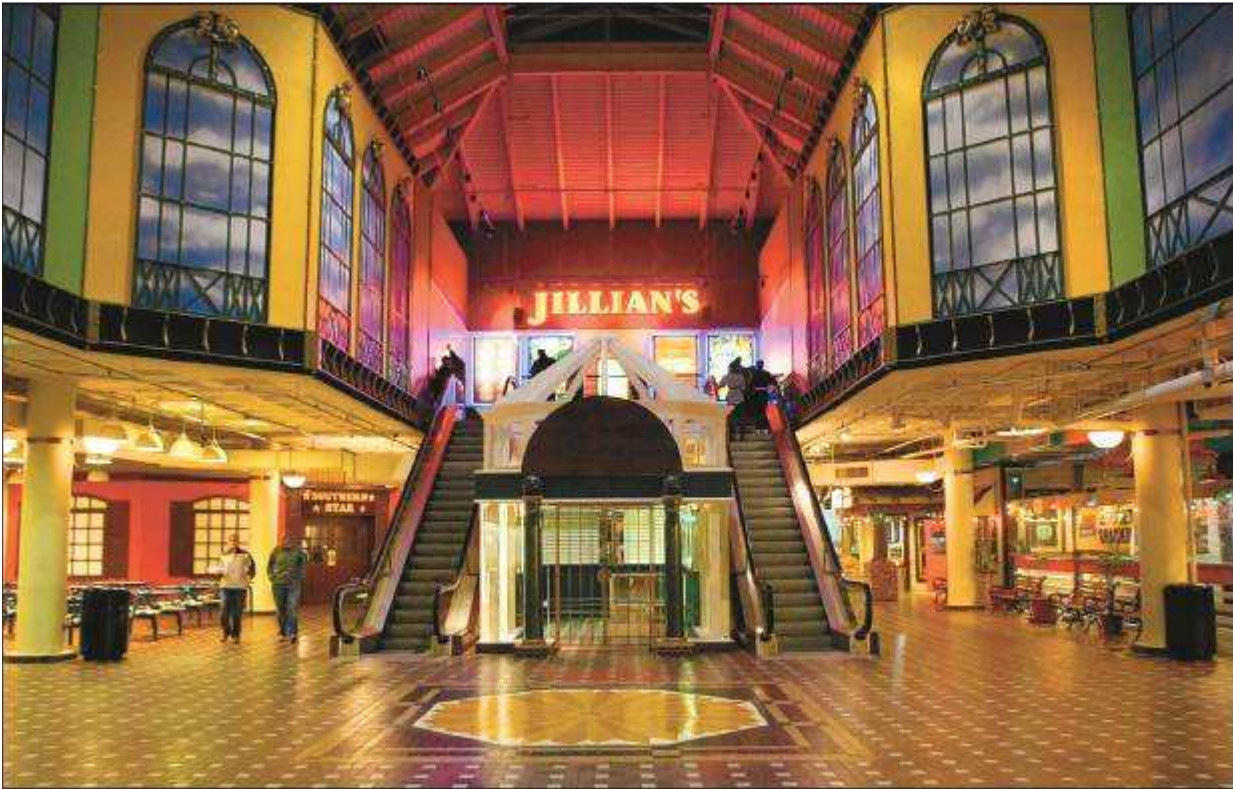
Hester raised concerns about Waterside more than a year ago, saying it "is in need of a lot of help."

Constructed in 1983 on the site of a parking lot along the Elizabeth River, Waterside opened as a festival marketplace that attracted huge crowds and more investment downtown. MacArthur Center mall, the revival of Granby Street, and construction of the Dominion Enterprises and Wells Fargo Center office towers would not have happened were it not for Waterside, Fraim said.

Over the years, the facility has been transformed from a festival marketplace into a shopping mall and then an entertainment center featuring nightclubs. Granby Street is now downtown's entertainment center, and Waterside has not received a significant renovation in more than a decade.

Today much of Water side, including most of its first-floor food court, is vacant. Two large vacancies occurred last year after the city closed Bar Norfolk and Have a Nice Day Cafe for what it said were repeated violations of city ordinances.

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VIRGINIAN-PILOT FILE PHOTO

At its 1983 debut, Waterside Festival Marketplace boasted 120 shops. In 1990, an \$8.5 million expansion opened. On a Saturday night in November, above, the facility was nearly empty.