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## Waterside 2.0

by Ben Swenson  
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The Harbor Club, above, is available for private events and can handle up to 500 guests.  
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Reviving an iconic landmark is a painstaking endeavor that must bridge people's nostalgia for the place and their modern desires. No ideas are too flashy, no details too small to consider.

The planners of downtown Norfolk's Waterside District stressed detail, especially windows and doors. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer ample views of the Elizabeth River. Some doors slide open accordion-style, while others roll up like garage

bays.

There is a reason for these architectural touches, according to Glenn Sutch, president of Waterside District. The new take on this old property will be “a waterfront experience,” with a goal of blending the inside and outside seamlessly. Waterside District opened in May after a \$40 million overhaul by The Cordish Companies, a Baltimore-based firm that has overseen similar redevelopment in cities across the country.

The 135,000-square-foot complex, designed around the structure’s previous footprint, is a mix of dining options and event space with areas devoted to gathering outside. The project’s supporters, as well as many civic and business officials, are optimistic that the redeveloped venue will help spur economic activity downtown.

Although Cordish’s portfolio and ambition are strong, many Hampton Roads residents remember the arc of Waterside’s previous incarnations. The destination served shoppers and diners downtown for a decade and a half before falling out of favor with patrons, despite its prime waterfront location.

The old Waterside is history, Sutch said, because the remade complex is now part of a much larger trend he called “the reshaping of downtown Norfolk.” The days of downtown Norfolk being a dormant urban core are over, he said. Sutch said the major difference now is that all manner of people come downtown, so Waterside District has been designed with inclusiveness in mind.

“We’re family-friendly, pet-friendly, everybody-friendly,” he said.

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The outdoor portion of the property encourages gathering and interaction – patio space is expanded, and at ground level, diversions such as bocce ball and a fireplace draw patrons outdoors. So-called “streetmosphere” performances, such as magicians, will offer entertainment. There are areas for regular, dedicated events, including a “Yappy Hour” for dog owners and yoga classes offered by the YMCA.

Another important component is Waterside District’s accessibility by water. But it’s not solely the novel amenities that will help cement Waterside District’s role as an economic cornerstone downtown. The broader economic picture demonstrates that “momentum is now on our side,” Sutch said.

If there is reason for optimism, it's that downtown's history points to the need for such a venue, said Karen Scherberger, the chief executive officer of Norfolk Festevents.

Scherberger has led the private nonprofit since 1982, a year before Waterside first opened. Back then, downtown Norfolk was a place many people worked, but few lived or dined. There simply weren't many options, Scherberger said. The spillover business for people who patronized Waterside and attended events at Town Point Park went to Ghent, which subsequently created a thriving dining scene.

A decade later, Waterside began to change because of unfortunate events. The venue added more entertainment and dining options, but the Gulf War removed a significant portion of potential patrons.

"It got derailed before it had a chance to pick up speed," she said. The opening of MacArthur Center in 1999 encouraged spillover business too. Only this time, Granby Street benefited from all the people spending time downtown.

The pattern is clear, Scherberger said. "Every time one of these larger centers comes on the scene, it creates business."

Now Scherberger and others in the business community believe that Waterside District is positioned to accommodate the influx of people arriving right now, as downtown Norfolk has continued the growth trajectory that has been building since the opening of MacArthur Center.

Developer Buddy Gadams has renovated and leased hundreds of apartments downtown. The \$175 million hotel and conference center The Main has added state-of-the-art conference facilities, as well as 300 rooms and three restaurants. Human resources firm ADP is in the midst of bringing 1,800 jobs to its office downtown.

There may be more major redevelopment on the horizon. City officials have been mulling the development of underutilized property between Harbor Park and Waterside District.

Tim Peters, general manager of the Sheraton Norfolk Waterside Hotel and executive board member of the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, said that the redevelopment downtown will foster cooperation among adjacent businesses, even those that are technically competing against one another.

For example, part of an ongoing, \$12 million renovation of the Sheraton, which is Waterside District's next-door neighbor, is the reimagining of its on-site restaurant.

"We're offering an upscale, southern-style seafood restaurant, with white tablecloths," Peters said. "This is something that Waterside District doesn't exactly have, so we think this is a style that complements them."

Already, businesses downtown have factored in the dynamics of adjacent businesses in their strategic planning, according to Scherberger.

"We look to each other downtown, when a cruise ship might be in or The Tides might be playing," she said. "We figure timing and traffic, how we might build off each others' strengths."

Proponents hope that the addition of a venue as eclectic as Waterside will not only make downtown Norfolk more economically vibrant, but help make it a destination.

"I came from Charleston and watched it evolve into the city that it is today," Peters said. "There's nothing Charleston or Savannah has that we don't have here. This city is getting ready to burst."

Scherberger said that Waterside will help cultivate return visits downtown. "The idea is to make downtown Norfolk like a three-ring circus," she said. "There are so many things going on that you're not sure where to look first, and when there are too many things to do in one visit, it gives people a reason to come back."