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Pier Working Group
City of St. Petersburg

Subject: New Pier Marine Discovery Center Idea

The new Pier Task Force is focused on recommending functions for a New Pier. A number of functions for a New Pier were suggested by the first Task Force. These included a promontory for engaging views of the bay and our city's skyline; expanded docking for boats; a large restaurant; limited retail related to family entertainment; space for community events; waterpark and/or family oriented entertainment; and pedestrian and bike trails. Also suggested was consideration of a "Marine Discovery Center." Of all the ideas generated for activities at the new Pier the Marine Discovery Center is one of the best.

The Pier has served as St. Petersburg's principal architectural symbol since the "Million Dollar Pier" was built in 1926, followed by the Inverted Pyramid. Ideally, the New Pier will reflect our city's uniqueness and special sense of place. The first Pier Task Force's vision for a new pier stated that the "architecture of the main building should reflect our history and unique identity as a City" and be "a worthy symbol of our great City." This is not only true of its architecture but also its function. The Task Force in particular noted that a new Pier should "speak to our city's beautiful aquatic setting." St. Petersburg has long been known as the "Sunshine City," and our new mayor has reemphasized that through the mantra, "The Sun Shines Here." Historically, it has been St. Pete's sunny climate and surrounding rich aquatic beauty and resources that have played a big role in making our city so special. Dr. C. W. Van Bibber may have gone a little too far in declaring St. Petersburg the healthiest climate in the world back in 1885, but he and other early city leaders were pivotal in moving the community in the direction of both a haven for tourists and a great place to raise a family that lasts to this day. None of this would have been possible except for our special geographic setting located on a peninsula between the Gulf and Tampa Bay, with their rich marine bio-diversity. Tampa Bay is our state's largest estuary. While at times we have not fully appreciated the blessings of our unique community, over the years we have come to better understand the fragility of our special ecosystem, and the safeguarding of this ecosystem is a now widely shared value.

The survey used in connection with the current Pier public input process defines a Marine Discovery Center as "a marine education center similar to Great Explorations Children's Museum." While this comparison conveys the excitement, fun and innovation that is intended in the idea of a Marine Discovery Center the concept reaches further. Great Explorations is an exciting children's activity center but it is not a marine education center. And while it includes parents in some activities it is most known for engaging children. A new Pier Marine Discovery Center could fully engage both children and adults—parents, other residents and tourists.

There are many different types of Marine Discovery Centers throughout the world. Each configures its program and architectural requirements to the special characteristics of their location. Should the current Task Force agree that a Marine Discovery Center would be an important possible function for a new Pier, logically the bidding design team would collaborate with the local marine and education community to design a structure that would especially fit St. Petersburg. Possible elements though might be a small specialized aquarium and touch tank designed to help tell the unique marine story of St. Petersburg and Tampa Bay. It could be combined with a children's waterpark and special accommodations for fishing. Demolished elements of the old pier could be used to construct artificial

reefs. Exhibits and interactive modules could be geared to support marine science teaching units in area schools and support field trips. Above all, the Discovery Center would be both informative and entertaining.

A Pier Marine Discovery Center also could ideally be a public-private partnership with the much celebrated St. Petersburg marine science economy. The nearby Bayboro Harbor Marine Science District is the largest marine science cluster in the Southeast. It includes the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), the Marine Technology Research Center; the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA); the Fisheries Service Southeast Regional Office; and the University of South Florida College of Marine Science. Other possible partners include Eckerd College Marine Science Program; Tampa Bay Watch; and Cousteau Divers. There are also the resources of the former successful Pier Aquarium and its successor the Secrets of the Sea Marine Exploration Center. Many of these organizations have organized as "The Ocean Team." A distinctive part of a Discovery Center in St. Pete could include featuring examples of the research and discoveries of these organizations.

Few if any other cities have such an abundance of expertise available to help plan and assist in the operation of a Marine Discovery Center unique to our city's sense of place.

Sincerely,
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