

# APPLICATION



City Name City of Gulfport

Population ☐ Under 10,000 ☒ Over 10,000

Category ☐ Public Safety ☒ Planning & Economic Development  
☐ City Spirit ☐ Public Works

Title of Entry Mississippi Aquarium

Description of Project Economic Growth in Gulfport, Mississippi's second largest city is profoundly tourism based, contributing to 27% of the local economy. Beginning in 2014, under Mayor Hewes' leadership, Gulfport had the vision to create a landmark Tourism-based Attraction on 9 acres over-looking the Gulf of Mexico. Those efforts developed the Mississippi Aquarium in Historic Downtown Gulfport. The Aquarium is a year-round, complete state of the art marine-life based educational and family entertainment campus, opening in late 2020.

Project Summary (use additional pages if necessary)  
See attached

Signature of Chief Elected or Appointed Official

Please provide the following information in case of questions about the application.

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### **The Mississippi Aquarium (MSAQ)**

While we are all in the business of seeking and encouraging projects that enhance either growth, stability, and quality of life in our communities, it is particularly exciting to have the opportunity to be part of something that covers all categories, and is of a scope that the impacts will be felt, not only at the local level, but on a regional stage. Most projects of note do not emerge overnight, and are the result of years of long-range visioning, planning, fundraising, and vetting before the first shovel is turned – the Mississippi Aquarium is no exception.

### **Background**

In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the City of Gulfport saw steady growth, particularly as a business center and import-export hub, and contributed to the success of the Gulf Coast region that was buoyed by the seafood and shipbuilding sectors – and in particular, the tourism industry. The “Golden Gulf Coast” was known for its white sand beaches, easy pace, salt water fishing, and world class cuisine. Among many attractions, one stood out – Marine Life, which featured dolphin shows, seal lion performances, a salt water tank, and harbor tour train. This facility hosted thousands of tourists a year, for decades. Although Marine Life survived the devastation of Hurricane Camille, it could not withstand the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina.

In rebuilding, much of the Coast was able to get back on its feet, piece-by-piece and reconstitute a flattened economy. As the pieces were put back together, Mississippi’s coastal residents exhibited their historic resiliency, remaking the region into a considerable economic impactor, and place where adults could find a variety of venues to relax and recreate. The one niche lacking in the tourism mix was family entertainment. With the rebirth of Jones Park and Gulfport’s Small Craft Harbor, it was clear there was a demand for showcasing the characteristics of culture, conservation, heritage, and entertainment for our community. Recognizing the need to fill this void in the market, efforts were made to revive the idea of an aquarium, with multiple cities showing interest, following the landfall of Hurricane Katrina.



## **Planting seeds**

Prior to becoming Gulfport's 21<sup>st</sup> Mayor, Billy Hewes served in the State Legislature for 20 years as a member of the State Senate (1992-2012). His last term of office was as Senate President Pro Tempore, forming a close alliance with Lieutenant Governor, Phil Bryant. Bryant was sworn in as Governor in 2012. Hewes became Mayor of Gulfport a year later. In August 2012, Governor Bryant formed *Go Coast 2020*, creating committees to assess and address the needs of Coastal Mississippi in anticipation of RESTORE Act settlement funds attributed to environmental and economic damages resulting from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010.

The overarching goals of this commission's work was to achieve economic and environmental recovery, and provide funding for projects that would have both immediate and long-lasting impacts. Those expenditures - used to finance capital projects - would hopefully have positive, generational impacts. At the time these opportunities were unfolding, Hewes was making plans for a run for office as Mayor. In the Spring of 2013, Hewes had no opposition, and, in advance of the July 2013 swear-in date, took the opportunity to assemble his own team of citizens to conduct a thorough needs assessment of the City – internally and externally.

## **Preparation**

The findings led to the composition of a team of City leaders who embraced an aggressive vision for elevating Gulfport's – and, by extension - the Gulf Coast's game. Again, in assessing the local tourism market, it was very apparent that there were plenty of offerings for adults, but not so much for families. The understanding that aquariums have been nothing short of transformational in communities where they have been built, provided the basis for plans around a legacy project, with an impact along the lines of what Gov. Bryant had envisioned.

When Gov. Bryant asked what he wanted to do, Hewes responded, "We need an aquarium."

In concert with the Gulfport City Council, led by Council President, Rusty Walker, Gulfport officials pressed forward with a goal of securing a nine (9)+ acre aquarium site, directly across from Jones Park. The answer as to why this (potentially) beautiful acreage had not been developed, was largely due to the fact that it was parceled and held by no fewer than ten (10) separate ownership interests. The Gulfport Redevelopment Commission (Gulfport's development entity – authorized by City Council action to engage in long-term contracts), chaired by Carole Lynn Meadows, began to piece together land purchases for what would become the Mississippi Aquarium campus.

## **Funding**

In the meantime, Gov. Bryant embraced the 'Mississippi Aquarium' concept immediately. He asked that a number of commitment levels be demonstrated. 1.) Local: the City of Gulfport obligated \$14 million towards the purchase of land for the campus; 2.) State: Bond (\$40 million) request drafted by Sen. Sean Tindell for consideration in 2015 Legislative Session – resulted in \$25.5 million funding championed by Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves; 3.) Private Sector Commitment: Development firm to build/renovate hotel adjacent to aquarium campus; 4.) Federal: Coast Transit Authority (CTA) repurposing the old Harrison County Library building into a Public Transit Center, including the construction of an elevated tramway and pedestrian crossing over Highway 90 into Jones Park, as well as enhancing utility and appearance of the existing parking garage adjacent to the site. As a result of these efforts, Gov. Bryant announced the awarding of \$17 million of RESTORE Act funds to be allocated towards the construction of the Mississippi Aquarium.



## Partnership

Mississippi Power Company CEO, Anthony Wilson, stepped into a leadership role for the MSAQ, taking the helm as Chairman of the MSAQ Philanthropic Committee. His immersion, along with that of Hancock Whitney CEO, John Hairston, have proven to be catalysts to make our facility a truly unique experience for all of Mississippi to have ownership and pride in. Our first philanthropic event, the Mississippi Aquarium *Splash Bash*, was an unprecedented, unqualified success, and is now a highly anticipated annual event. So far, the Capital Campaign for the MSAQ is approaching \$10 million in private donations and pledges. To underscore the fact that this is *Mississippi's Aquarium*, both the operational and philanthropic boards are led by members from all reaches of the Magnolia State!

Gulfport CAO, John Kelly, has been relentless in pursuit of additional sources of funding through regular interactions with officials at the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA), and on the Federal level. As a result of the manner in which Gulfport has effectively managed the expenditure and tracking of federal and state project monies, the MDA awarded funding for additional streetscape improvements in areas adjacent to the aquarium campus. Gov. Bryant also provided additional funding from available BP Settlement Funds, and most recently, Federal funding has been authorized through the Federal Transit Authority for the CTA build-out and the tramway across Highway 90. Although additional support is hoped for from the State Legislature, the City of Gulfport leveraged an additional \$34 million in bonds in 2017 to ensure successful completion of this state-of-the-art, world class facility. In total, this, the largest P4 (Public, Private, Philanthropic) Project in our State's history, will represent an investment of \$103 million, and is scheduled to welcome the public at the Grand Opening, slated for September, 2020!

## Impacts

Development and anticipation of The Mississippi Aquarium have brought a new enthusiasm to the citizens of Gulfport and indicators of the hoped-for economic stimulus resulting from this grand plan have started to emerge. New restaurants have been constructed, the long-shuttered historic Markham Hotel is presently undergoing refurbishment, and there is increased demand for Downtown residential and mixed-use livability all within proximity to the Aquarium. Residential construction is occurring at a steady pace across the City, and the largely abandoned 50-acre historic property on Gulfport's beach front - Centennial Plaza – which was recently host to Mississippi's Bicentennial Kick-Off Celebration, is completely renovated and features two hotels, restaurants, a splash pad and lazy river, and a chapel for destination weddings. Not only is the Mississippi Aquarium a world class regional tourism attraction for the State, it is an economic engine driving local investment which will only further improve Gulfport's Quality of Life for generations. COVID-19 may present an economic challenge to all of us, but we believe Gulfport will be poised for success, as America and the world establish a "new normal."

David Kimmel, bringing expertise from experience with the Georgia Aquarium, was brought on to get this project off the ground and to a point where it could be turned over to capable hands. Recently, Kurt Allen, was selected as MS Aquarium President and CEO, and continues to provide construction and contract oversight, as well as making operational plans for exhibits, animals, employees, and volunteers. These efforts have decidedly been a team approach, particularly in collaborating with partners like the University of Southern Mississippi School of Oceanographic Studies, the State Port at Gulfport, and the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources.

## Coming Soon, September 2020

Exhibits on the 9 acre Mississippi Aquarium campus will feature a freshwater river through the center of the property – complete with otters and alligators; traveling exhibits; an aviary - featuring birds native to our region; a dolphin exhibit – one of the main features consistently asked for by residents; and a





35,000-gallon saltwater tank – featuring sharks, rays, eels, countless fish – and a transparent walk-through tube, suspended in the water – the only one of its type in America! The University of Southern Mississippi's marketing study anticipates over 350,000 regional guests annually consisting of school field trips, summer camps, on-site events and receptions and family outings. All those who pass under the towering sails will discover a tremendous entertainment experience where education is disguised as fun!

The dream has become a reality! It is remarkable how much excitement the mere thought of a world-class aquarium in Mississippi has generated. And it is simply amazing how many believers are now on board, having seen the structures rise from urban blight to provide what promises to be an iconic structure and truly memorable experience, for generations to come!

## THE MAKING OF THE MISSISSIPPI AQUARIUM



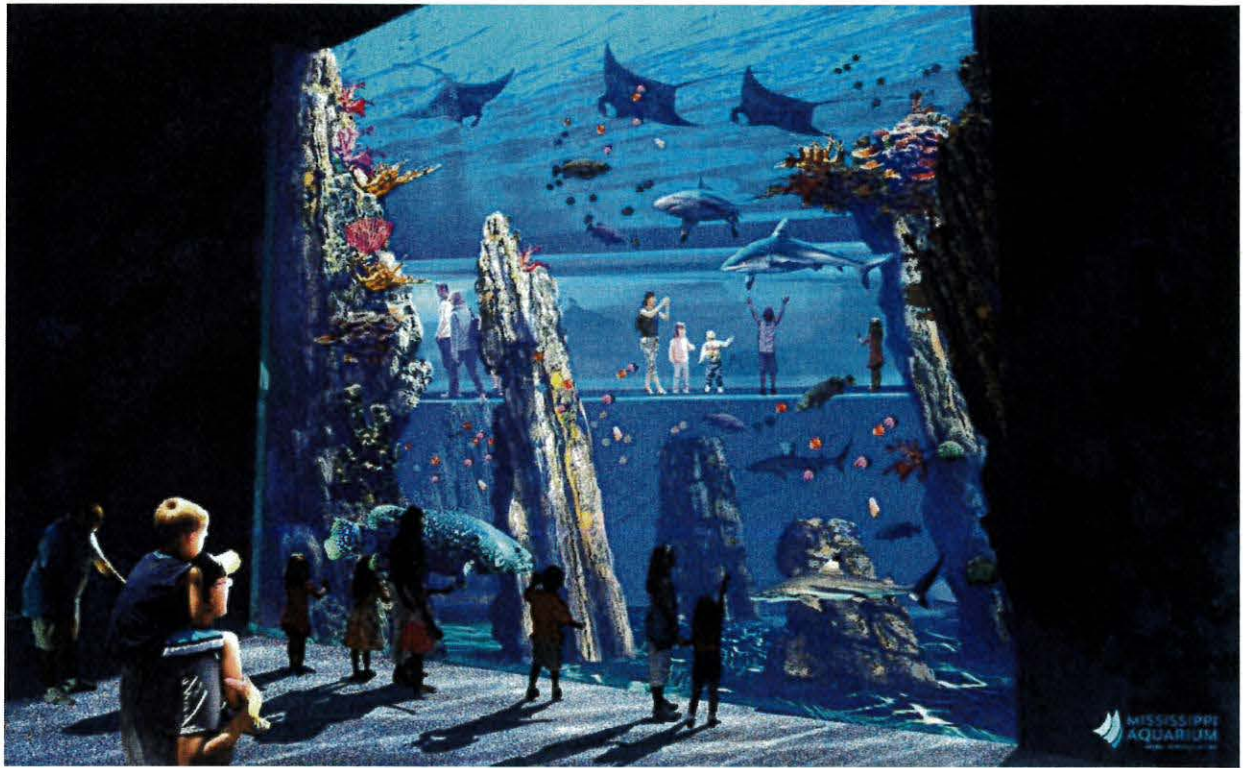




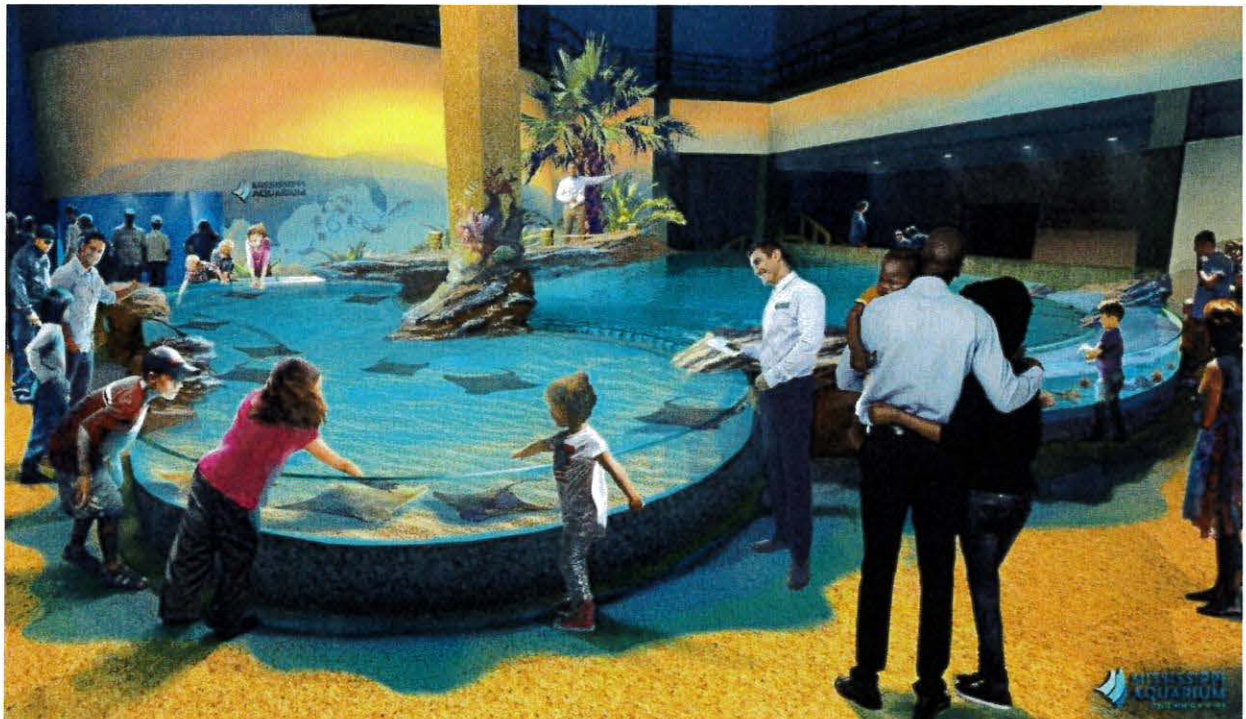
Crocks and more!







The Big View!



Touch Tanks for everyone!



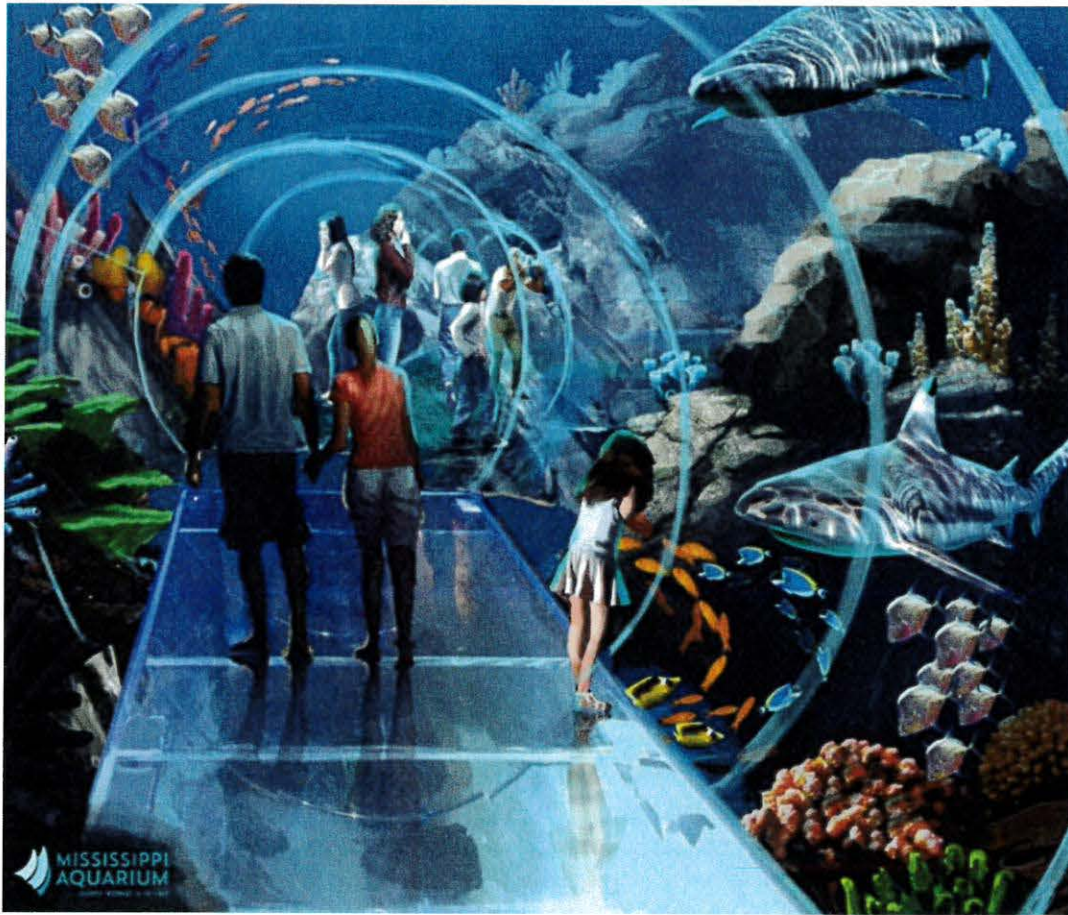


Deep below the water, sized just right for the young visitors!



Explore the Aviary!





One-of-a-kind memorable experiences await you at the MS Aquarium!





