



# Hemming Park – Jacksonville, Florida

## 2015 IDA Downtown Achievement Awards Submission: Public Space

Hemming Park is the subject of a public-private partnership between the City of Jacksonville and Friends of Hemming Park (FOHP). Downtown Vision, Inc. (DVI) is the Business Improvement District for Downtown Jacksonville and was a partner in the creation of FOHP, is currently represented on the FOHP Board of Directors and provides clean and safe services to the park through a contract with FOHP. This submission is being made by DVI on behalf of FOHP and its partner organizations.

### **THE CHALLENGE: REVIVING A NEGLECTED URBAN PARK**

Hemming Park is Jacksonville, Florida's oldest public park, occupying 1.54 acres in the center of Jacksonville's major civic buildings, including City Hall, the Main Library and the Museum of Contemporary Art - Jacksonville. Once the center of Downtown life, Hemming Park was converted into a plaza during the 1970s, and ultimately fell into disrepair and became a haven for public drinking, drug activity and other nuisance activity. Installed in the early 2000s, fixed tables and chairs were in varying states of disrepair and were frequently occupied for the day by park visitors who often engaged in nuisance activity. The park was often filled with litter and smelled strongly of urine, and a colony of rats thrived. While occasional special events in the park were generally well attended, the general population avoided the park on an everyday basis because of its reputation for unsavory activity.

Looking at options for improving the park, The City of Jacksonville issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) in December 2013 for private management of Hemming Park. Downtown Vision, Inc. (DVI), the Cultural Council of Greater Jacksonville and local art activist/historian Dr. Wayne Wood came together to respond to the RFP. This collaboration was the genesis of the Friends of Hemming Park, a nonprofit organization that was formed for the purpose of managing and improving Hemming Park.

### **THE SOLUTION: FRIENDS OF HEMMING PARK MANAGEMENT PLAN**

The Friends of Hemming Park (FOHP) team developed a comprehensive plan for management of the park and entered into a contract with the City of Jacksonville to take over management of Hemming Park in October 2014. The city committed to \$1 million in funding for an 18-month period, at the end of which Friends of Hemming Park is expected to be self-sufficient. Key components of the FOHP team's plan for the park included:

- Staffing the park every day from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. with DVI Ambassadors who provide clean and safe services
- Programming the park with a mix of small-scale daily events and large-scale special events
- A dedicated social worker on staff to connect those in need with services
- Replacement of fixed tables and chairs with moveable tables and chairs
- Food vendor for lunchtime service
- Marketing and communication with Downtown stakeholders to change the perception of Hemming Park

### **EXECUTION**

Upon approval of the management contract by the Jacksonville City Council, the FOHP Board kicked off in high gear. The first step was to staff the park. Clean and safe Ambassadors began daily work to clean the park and inform "park regulars" of upcoming changes. A social service professional was brought on board to work with park users who needed services. Additional staff was brought on to focus on programming and marketing. Public input was solicited from longtime park users and other Downtown stakeholders about desired changes. FOHP worked with the City to ensure that needed repairs were made and to remove obsolete fixed tables and chairs in preparation for the arrival of movable furniture. The park was rebranded thanks to in-kind services from a local marketing agency. Food trucks were brought in to serve lunch during the week, and a coffee vendor set up shop in the park. Events were planned. And perhaps most important, the public took note and more people started using Hemming Park rather than passing through it or avoiding it altogether.

## OUTCOME

FOHP has been managing Hemming Park for nearly eight months, and the changes to the park in this short time have been remarkable. Highlights from this short time include:

- Installation of several public art pieces, including three sculptures, a mosaic, a mural and a “yarn bomb”
- Incorporation of an “Imagination Playground” in a Kids Zone that has proven very popular
- Estimated park attendance of 472,170 from October 1, 2014 – May 31, 2015, with increases in attendance each quarter;
- A strong social media presence that includes nearly 8,500 followers on Facebook, 2,150 followers on Instagram and 1,500+ followers on Twitter.
- 315 social service client contacts that have resulted in 117 homeless individuals connected with services, including 19 persons placed in permanent or transitional housing and 17 veterans referred to Supportive Services for Veteran Families
- Revenue is being generated from event and vendor fees, as well as beverage sales and a “Friends” member program
- Receipt of a \$100,000 grant from Southwest Airlines Heart of the Community Program and \$100,000 worth of consulting services from Project for Public Places
- An \$800,000 multi-year sponsorship from the Florida Times-Union.

## INNOVATION

Where Hemming Park has differed from other parks is the speed at which changes were made without substantial changes in the park infrastructure. This rapid implementation was possible because of a plan that was both comprehensive and compassionate in its approach and a team that is committed to making Hemming Park a destination. A focus on “lighter, cheaper, faster” approaches to park amenities and programming have allowed for experimentation to see what works best. Additionally, park staffing from Day 1 and aggressive branding and messaging helped reverse negative perceptions of Hemming Park.

## REPLICATION

The problem of neglected and underused urban parks is not unique. The Hemming Park team drew on experiences from other cities and applied these concepts locally in a comprehensive and compassionate manner. Having a social service worker dedicated to the park early in the private management process was critical to gain the trust of longtime park users and was a critical public relations element given that there had been negative media portrayal of the city’s privatization plan. The most important lesson from Hemming is that rapid changes are possible given a high level of political will and adequate public funding and a comprehensive, coordinated approach.

## REPRESENTATION

The transformation of Hemming Park would not have been possible without collaboration by Friends of Hemming Park, Downtown Vision, Inc., the City of Jacksonville, Jacksonville Public Library, The Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless and countless volunteers. The FOHP team understood that gaining the trust of and working with longtime park users who were perceived as undesirable by others would be a critical component of success. Many longtime park users have become the biggest park champions, with leaders of various social groups in the park providing an element of peer pressure for compliance with park rules. Hemming Park is for everyone and a diverse group of stakeholders provides regular input to FOHP.

## SUSTAINABILITY

While the City of Jacksonville provided an initial infusion of startup capital, FOHP is expected to be self-sustaining by the end of its 18-month startup period and fundraising goals to date have been exceeded. While large special events are an important revenue stream, small-scale daily programming keeps people coming to the park.

## CONCLUSION

Hemming Park has experienced a remarkable transition in eight short months in the face of numerous obstacles, including the perception that it was not a safe park to visit. The success of the park has filtered throughout Downtown, with more people coming Downtown for events in the park and then staying to patronize Downtown businesses. Hemming Park’s success would not be possible without a coordinated, comprehensive approach. We look forward to seeing what the future holds for Hemming Park and expect that it will continue to be a success.