Visitors praise city projects

Chattanooga called a model for riverfront revitalization

BY HERMAN WANG
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As the Scenic City began its urban renewal efforts 25 years ago, Chattanooga officials looked to other cities, such as Indianapolis, for ideas and inspiration.

Now, civic leaders say, Chattanooga has become a model with its revitalized waterfront and downtown area. This week, the city hosted delegations from Los Angeles and Dayton, Ohio, that came to tour the facilities and amenities along the Tennessee River.

"This shows just how far we have come," Mayor Ron Littlefield said. "Dayton and Los Angeles are a pretty broad spectrum of metropolitan areas. It shows Chattanooga is getting to be known far and wide."

Gary Moore, city engineer for Los Angeles, said he came away impressed with Chattanooga's 21st Century Waterfront and Parks and Recreation Department, and Bill Wenk, president of Wenk Association, from left, ride the carousel in Coolidge Park while on a tour of the Chattanooga riverfront Tuesday.

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how quickly the project came together.

Announced by former Mayor Bob Corker in 2002, the recently completed waterfront was a $120 million project financed by a $55 million bond issue and a 4 percent hotel-motel tax. The project included the expansion of the Tennessee Aquarium and Hunter Museum of American Art, construction of the Ross's Landing Pier and installation of an outdoor art garden, Cherokee memorial and other facilities.

Los Angeles planners hope to make a similar revitalization along its Los Angeles River, and that city's leaders this week announced a $3 million, 18-month planning process to draft a 20-year blueprint for its river restoration effort.

"We're very excited about learning about Chattanooga's planning process, and we're impressed that Chattanooga was able to implement (the plan) in such a short time," Mr. Moore said Tuesday as the 11-member delegation toured the Tennessee Riverpark, Coolidge Park and Renaissance Park. "Usually when you're talking about projects of this scale, it can take up to 10 years or more."

Los Angeles officials also are touring Denver, Washington, D.C., and San Antonio to see those riverfront areas.

Rivers in the United States long have been used for transportation and industrial needs, but the Los Angeles River, 32 miles of which flow through Los Angeles, has largely been paved over and used for flood control. City officials there, however, are considering removing portions of the river's concrete lining, which will allow the river to support parks and wildlife habitat while still providing flood control.

During their stay in Chattanooga, the Los Angeles delegation heard presentations from city officials and representatives of RiverCity Co., the city's nonprofit downtown redevelopment agency, on maintenance, security, planning and funding.

"One of the lessons we've learned is the public and private funding of projects like this," Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley said. "L.A. needs all of its citizens to engage in this civic effort. We're a city that has turned its back on our river, and Chattanooga has been just impressive in how everybody worked together to reconnect to their river."

Dayton, Ohio, officials, meanwhile, were in town Monday to learn about Outdoor Chattanooga, the city's department overseeing outdoor recreation. They also toured parks, and Rob Healy, administrator at Parks and Recreation, took them kayaking in the Tennessee River and bicycling along the Riverwalk.

"We talked to them about Outdoor Chattanooga, how it began and what it's doing," Mr. Healy said. "They'll be taking our Outdoor Chattanooga model and instituting it into Dayton."

Besides showing the Los Angeles and Dayton delegations what Chattanooga has to offer, city officials said they can learn a lot from leading the tours, too.

"It's an opportunity, too, for us to hear what they're doing," Mr. Healy said. "They're another resource we can bounce our ideas off of."

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