

Jeff Swanagan, Executive Director of The Georgia Aquarium was our guest speaker May 19 at the Loudermilk Center. Jeff entertained the audience of 125 members and guests with impersonations of local personalities (due to technical AV difficulties...) and energetic sharing of a few facts surrounding the greatly anticipated Georgia Aquarium. Expected to open to the public in the fall 2005, the Georgia Aquarium, along with the new World of Coca-Cola, is a project garnering a lot of attention - and spurring excitement about downtown Atlanta's future development. The Marcus Foundation broke ground, along with Coke, on May 29, 2003 at a 20-acre site just north of Centennial Olympic Park. The Aquarium's mascot, "Deepo" was also unveiled at this time. Thanks to "Neemo", Deepo is a solid color orange fish versus the originally planned clown fish mascot.

The 430,000 square foot aquarium will be the home to more than 50,000 aquatic animals from about 500 species collected from around the world and will be housed in over 5 million gallons of recycled fresh and salt water. (That's a pool about the size of a football field filled with water 11 feet deep!) To give this grand facility perspective, the Baltimore and Monterrey aquariums on average each hold about 2.4 million gallons of water and have about 15,000 aquatic animals - and they are in the top three of the "large" aquariums in the world! Only the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago is larger, holding 4.2 million gallons of water. Another interesting tidbit, there are approximately 5,000 species of mammals and approximately 10,000 species of birds but there are possibly 24,204 species of aquatic life - four of which were named by Dr. Bruce Carlson, VP for Life Science at the Georgia Aquarium!

Jeff shared that the key factor in designing the aquarium has been to "LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN". Heery International was brought in early as the program manager to help identify the initial design criteria and overall facility program. TVS Architects is the local architect of record and PGAV out of St. Louis is the "exhibit" architect. Brasfield and Gorrie is the general contractor. The facility will have an event room that will accommodate 1,200 guests in a seated format or 2,000 guests in a reception format and will have wonderful views of the live exhibits. The team has focused on incorporating not only the messages of science, education, and conservation, but also entertainment to ensure the aquarium will "reach your heart as much as it will teach your mind".

The main exhibits have not been announced yet but Jeff did share that the tanks will emulate as much of the natural environment as possible and many of the exhibits will contain a mix of species. Approximately 50% of the animals will come from the "aquaculture" industry (fish farms) and the remaining will be collected from their natural habitats and acquired from other aquariums. The first floor will contain the general public exhibits and the second floor will house the education labs where attendees can participate in high-end education experiences and view the exhibits from the top of the tanks.

There is an advisory committee comprised of representatives from major universities, including the big three here in Georgia. The building is designed to incorporate many LEED elements and as much green design as the animal requirements will allow. Jeff pointed out that after the initial fill, the aquarium will use less water on a daily basis than most large office buildings - and that is accounting for the estimated 2 million visitors per year. On that note, Jeff shared an interesting fact - more people in the USA (about 135 million) visit zoos and aquariums each year than attend all professional sporting events COMBINED!

Today, there are 350 people working on site six days per week and one section of the facility is already under roof. There are currently 20 employees working for the Georgia Aquarium and Jeff expects to have approximately 200 on board by opening day. There will also be approximately 500 volunteers on the team to keep operations running smoothly once the facility opens.

Mr. Marcus has established the Georgia Aquarium a non-profit, 501(c)(3) corporation with an initial \$200 million donation. His expectation is that the Georgia business and political leaders will embrace this as an opportunity to grow and leverage this center to the benefit of the community.