

Parking garage could be money-making machine

St. Augustine, Fla., proves modern convenience has place in historic town

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

ST. AUGUSTINE, Fla. — John Regan, city manager of the oldest continuously occupied European-established settlement within the borders of the contiguous U.S., has plenty of praise for having a parking garage in a historic town.

He said there was a lot of similarity between Cape May and St. Augustine.

Regan, who was the project manager of the garage, said initially residents were fearful of the effects of constructing a parking garage.

"It was a very controversial topic for St. Augustine, as you can imagine," he said. "Almost a 50-50 split over how the town felt over the parking garage."

The question did not go to voter referendum and the city pledged using non ad valorem revenue such as special assessments and service charges, which are not based upon the value of the property and millage.

St. Augustine started with fact-finding and 32 public outreach meetings, Regan said. The fact-finding included determining what the tourism load was and how many parking spaces were available, what's in city control, what's in private inventory, what are the patterns, he said.

"Typically that will show you that you don't have near enough parking," Regan said.

He said St. Augustine was losing parking inventory over a long period of time with most parking lots controlled by the private sector. The land for the 1,170-space garage was owned by the city and paved with asphalt, he said. The price tag for the four-level garage with renovations to an aging, adjacent visitor information center was about \$21 million with a base bid on the garage of \$18 million.

A parking garage is probably the only viable solution for Cape May, unless the scope of the Lafayette Street park can be reduced.

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"When we started, we showed a lot of different concepts of what the garage could look like from ultramodern to Mediterranean Revival, and we really spent a lot of time vetting those with the community and gauging what we thought was the most acceptable design," Regan said.

After choosing the Mediterranean Revival design, he worked with groups to get their input to improve the design to meet their concerns or expectations. Regan said a lot of time was put into designing the mass and scale of the garage.

He said based on the number of tourists that visit Cape May, a parking garage would be a "money-making machine." Regan said visitors in St. Augustine will pay whatever it costs to park in the garage, which currently is \$12 for a full day of parking.

"For the business community, this garage is a lifesaver," he said. "When people are out of their cars, that's when they spend money, not when they're driving around."

Prior to opening the garage, Regan said he had a number of parking complaints on his desk Monday morning, but that stopped when the parking garage opened in 2006.

"I know for us, building the garage was very controversial. But I don't know how we would be functioning without it and our economy has done



St. Augustine, Fla., financed and built a \$21 million, 1,170-space parking garage that opened in 2006, and found that not only did it fit in aesthetically with the historic buildings in the oldest continuously occupied European-established settlement in the contiguous U.S., but that it made money and increased tourism.

much, much better with it," he said.

Regan, who is a trained engineer, initially recommended a smaller structure in a phased construction plan, but the city manager at the time of construction recommended building the garage all at one time as large as possible without violating all zoning standards.

The project was mostly paid for by bonding, he said. St. Augustine has a Community Redevelopment Area (CRA), which creates tax increment financing.

"The way a CRA works

is you take an area and say 'Look, this area has a problem,' some form of a blight," Regan said. "In your case, it would be a parking and traffic blight."

With a CRA, a base year of what the taxation value of all structures within the area is determined. As the values rise, the rise in taxation would be dedicated to solving the blight problem.

"In this case, you build a garage to solve the blight," he said.

In St. Augustine, for \$1 of new taxation value, about 50 cents goes to the city and

about 50 cents go to the county. He said a CRA diverts the 50 cents that goes to the county back to the city to solve the problem.

Regan said when St. Augustine went into the project, they viewed it as a financial liability but it has been very successful. He said St. Augustine has both a summer and winter tourist season.

"We're generating roughly \$4 million per year and debt service is like \$1 million, operations are \$300,000," Regan said. "It's funding quite a bit of other things in the city, actually."

"It's the best thing we ever did," he continued.

He said tourism went up substantially as a result of the parking garage "once we were able to get people parked." Visitor numbers jumped from 4 million per year to 7 million per year in total visitor load.

"Your economy is controlled by the ability to park people," he said.

St. Augustine is working toward building a second parking garage as a public/private partnership on private land, a former coal-gasification plant site similar to Cape May's Lafayette Street site.

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—John Regan, city manager, St. Augustine, Fla.

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