

JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

With vacation destinations such as Orlando and Miami in Florida, Jacksonville is sometimes the forgotten community. Few people recognize that it is the largest city (by area) in the contiguous United States, that it has an expansive park system with over 80,000 acres, and that it is an amazingly diverse community.

Among the handful of National Park Service (NPS) sites in or near Jacksonville, the most familiar is Timucuan Ecological and Historical Preserve (Timucuan), named for the indigenous peoples who previously populated northern Florida. The NPS has also been active in Jacksonville over the past decade through a number of NPS community assistance programs and partnerships. This includes work like the recent designation and preservation of the Norman Film Manufacturing Company National Historic Landmark, a prominent studio that produced silent films featuring all-African-American casts in the 1920s, when Jacksonville was heralded as the “Winter Film Capital.”

In talking with Urban Fellow Nathan Souder about the city and its rich history, it is clear that Jacksonville is brimming with opportunities to look at relevancy and collaboration critically and served as the perfect laboratory to test the tenets of the NPS Urban Agenda in the Southeast Region.

Despite the election of a new mayor at the very beginning of this project, the City of Jacksonville was highly supportive of the Urban Agenda, providing Souder with a secondary “home-base” office with city parks and contacts at city hall. This opened an opportunity for more active communication and coordination between the NPS and the city, strengthening their working relationship. While building buy-in for the Urban Agenda, it became evident that Jacksonville had, according to Souder, “substantial capacity and partners for the kinds of programs and partnerships the NPS was looking to form, but the city needed a convener to connect and expand existing efforts.”

One of the main focuses in Jacksonville was on youth engagement and the creation

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of fun, educational programming. Many NPS units face a challenge of transporting students to their parks, consistently, without grant funding. Through working with the City of Jacksonville, Souder learned that the NPS could tap into their field trip schedule. Souder explained, “If hundreds of field trips hosted by the city and community partners could bring their kids to Timucuan, we could offer them fun and diverse activities with no entrance fee and no grant monies needed.” As a result Timucuan leveraged its recreational and interpretive resources to successfully support all seven City of Jacksonville Recreation Centers’ summer camps, bringing hundreds of youth to the park.



Furthering this youth focus through a culture of collaboration, NPS sought additional partner support and collectively established a pilot curriculum—Lift Every Voice—for afterschool and summer programs that engaged students in the area’s rich African-American history and sites while addressing the community’s expressed need to increase youth literacy. To add to the diversity, Atrévete a Explorar (Dare to Explore) was successful at connecting Hispanic and Latino audiences to recreational and educational opportunities at the Kingsley Plantation in Timucuan. An NPS partnership with Groundwork Jacksonville led to a week-long fishing camp, a Biodiversity Festival, and a series of campouts on City, State and Federal lands.



LESSONS LEARNED

Bring something to the table

The implementation of the Urban Agenda in Jacksonville led to not only new programs and partnerships, but spurred staff at Timucuan to rethink existing program design and partner involvement. Souder explained, “Intentionally involving diverse groups in program design can create long term stewards and powerful partnerships.” By tapping into programs that seek out and promote the hiring of diverse youth—like the Park Service’s Latino Heritage Internship Program or partnerships with Historic Black Colleges and Universities—Souder was able to add a cohort of interns to the National Park Service team in Jacksonville to bring a fresh perspective to the existing work at Timucuan and better represent the diversity of peoples in Jacksonville.

View Park Visitors as Investors

It is important to recognize that each unit is part of a system and it is all too easy to treat visitors as a one-time exchange. Instead we need to be intentional and proactive about giving park visitors a reason to come back. Souder explained that as investors, “Current and target audiences should be brought into the decision-making process so that they can tell us what is relevant to them, not the other way around.”

Map Assets to Create & Maintain a Blueprint

The Urban Agenda spurred NPS and its partners to take a more comprehensive and holistic look at Jacksonville’s assets.

Out of this work came an asset map—a delineated network of projects,



partners, and available resources related to Jacksonville’s history and public lands. Given to the city to further the partnership between Timucuan and the local government, the asset map strengthens the collaborative efforts of NPS and partners and shows the NPS investment in an area. This tool was a key method in linking historically and culturally important sites across the city and providing important metrics to political appointees.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NPS

Investing in NPS capacity, trust-building with key constituents and partners, and establishing realistic targets for change were Souder’s top recommendations. Above all, he underscored the importance of adopting a good customer service mindset and perspective when approaching partnerships. The NPS must build trust with its stakeholders and partners. Today’s culture is one filled with reviews and star ratings of anything—a ride-share driver, the restaurant one just ate at, and even the national parks. The NPS will develop greater brand loyalty if it continues to view partnerships as reciprocal relationships. Through the implementation of the Urban Agenda, he saw first-hand how effective it was to take time to build relationships with community residents, the City of Jacksonville, Groundwork Jacksonville, YMCA, and Wilderness Inquiry, to name a few.