

The Museum Reach: Flood Control Disguised As A Park

Jack Morgan

3-4 minutes

With great fanfare on May 30, 2009, the [Museum Reach](#) stretch of the River Walk opened to the public. But as interesting as the Museum Reach is, the story of how it came about is equally so.

If you're new to San Antonio you may not know that five years ago, the stretch of Broadway coming out of downtown had very few thriving businesses and a lot of boarded-up, tagged buildings. The idea of a Broadway rejuvenation was an extremely hard sell.

County Judge Nelson Wolff remembers the uphill sell back then.

"A lot of people had no confidence in the fact that we would have an urban renewal in the city center; that we'd see the center city come to life," Wolff said.

To rejuvenate Broadway, and create the Museum Reach, key things had to happen. First: One of San Antonio's lesser-known technological marvels: The flood tunnel.

In the late 1990s the San Antonio River Authority and Army Corps of Engineers finished a 3-mile-long, 24-ft. wide tunnel 150 feet below the city, to send flood waters underneath and away from

downtown. Intake is by Josephine Street, and the outlet is at Lone Star Blvd.

"When the tunnel project was built, that's really what allowed for improvements in the Museum Reach to actually become a reality," said SARA's Suzanne Scott.

Dozens of floods had plagued downtown for the last 200 years. The construction of the Olmos Dam had helped, but the flood tunnel ensured catastrophic flooding downtown would no longer happen.

"We have done a very good job of taking something which is a huge problem, which is a few days a year we have too much water; the rest of the year we have way too little water," said San Antonio River Oversight Committee Co-Chair Irby Hightower, who explained how the city's been able to work with the river's unique dilemma.

"And we have turned that problem into a great linear park that serves the community in many, many different ways including flood control," Hightower said. "It's a great flood control project but it has also done a lot of other things that helps the city."

What we now think of as a landscaped park has historically been a deadly channel of raging water a few days every year. Also necessary to move forward was to focus on the Museum Reach not as a singular project, but as a part of the entire San Antonio River.

"We really tried to step back and look at the project holistically," said Scott. "We really needed to think about doing this project in a way that would be an economic stimulator that everyone was looking for in this section."

The flood tunnel and master planning phases of the project were prerequisite, but then it gets back to money.

"The acquisition of the Pearl by 'Kit' Goldsbury; that was the catalyst," said Scott.

The development at the end of the Museum Reach helped to legitimize the project to the business community.

"So then people started thinking about: There is some opportunity here," said Scott.

Hightower said the Museum Reach was paid for by the city through general obligation bonds, through the county with flood control money, and then the clincher was this:

"That we could use hotel/motel tax money for that part of the project," Hightower said.

And the Museum Reach effort steamed forward.