



Uptown Columbus, Inc.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Once Georgia's second-largest city's bustling heart, Uptown Columbus thrived for over a century along the Chattahoochee River. Powering the booming textile industry, titans of the time-built dams in 1828 and 1868; however, fast forward over 100 years, and the industry had moved overseas, leaving the river a lifeless industrial waterway. The aging, leaking dams presented a daunting challenge, both economic and environmental.

Uptown devised a seemingly "crazy" plan: Transform the industrial river into a whitewater rafting and outdoor recreation paradise. Determined, Uptown Columbus raised \$26.3 million, secured the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' approval, hired engineers to design the course and brought in an experienced outfitter to run the whitewater operations. A decade of work culminated in the dramatic removal of the dams in 2013. Rafting started to rave reviews.

Capitalizing on the project's success, they built ziplines connecting Georgia and Alabama, followed by a playground, splashpad and expanded bike paths. As a capstone of its first decade, the International Canoe Federation's selected the Uptown to host the freestyle kayak world championships. This Olympic-level event, featuring 211 athletes and officials, thrust Columbus' waterway onto the international stage.

Uptown's river project changed the entire trajectory of downtown and the city.

INNOVATION

Thousands of downtown organizations across the globe provide services such as economic development, marketing, special events, clean and safe programs, placemaking, real estate development, membership relations and legislative affairs. Uptown Columbus have taken a remarkable path, transforming their downtown through bold initiatives.

Uptown did not just plan but became developers. They acquired a river, donated it back to the city, and secured rights to create a haven for outdoor recreation. They built a world-class whitewater course, a state-straddling zipline and a family-friendly zone with playgrounds, splashpads and even a disc golf course. Additionally, the project has restored habitat for endangered fish and plants. The organization's work to make outdoor recreation a centerpiece of downtown offers another innovation.

Uptown's leadership extends beyond development. They recognized the potential of their whitewater course and successfully hosted the prestigious ICF World Kayaking Championships. This 11-day event, attracting over 200 international athletes from 18 countries, showcased Columbus' revitalized waterway on the global stage.

OUTCOME

In its first 30 years of operations, Uptown helped to attract \$848.4 million in new investment. In the ten years since the river opened, Uptown has already attracted over \$726.8 million in new investment. The tourism impact is also impressive. Prior to 2013, Uptown had three hotels with 399 rooms. Since the river re-opened, Uptown added four new hotels and 384 rooms. Uptown's outfitter sells about 41,000 rafting and ziplining trips a year. This generates over \$265,000 a year of income for the Uptown organization. Unfortunately, Uptown has no way of tracking the exact numbers of kayakers a year as they can play in the river for free. Uptown estimates that the playground attracts over 31,700 kids a year. The splashpad season spans about 130 days and Uptown estimates over 10,000 users a year. The 16-mile riverwalk is free for public use; however, the organization is unable to estimate the annual number of walkers and bikers on this trail. In 2018, Uptown created a brand called Rushsouth Whitewater Park to market all its outdoor recreation assets. Rushsouth has its own website, Facebook page, Instagram and email newsletter. These combined platforms have over 47,905 followers. The outdoor recreation branding is so complete that the entire community now touts this trait. The Chamber of Commerce, Convention and Visitors Bureau, Trade Center and others adopted the brand and prominently feature images of Uptown's rafting and ziplining to sell the community to prospects.

EXECUTION

The project took over ten years. Uptown first had to convince area residents that the project was viable. This was done via an economic impact analysis from Columbus State University. Buying two dams that were already failing required a major leap of faith. Uptown had to accept a massive risk to move forward. The Corps of Engineers manages waterways across the nation. Removing dams made the Corps uncomfortable. Uptown undertook multiple studies and engaged federal and state officials to gain the Corps support. The organization also hired an environmental engineering firm to plan the whitewater course. They built a scaled model of the entire 2.5-mile section of the river to study water flows and patterns. Georgia Power Company is a utility provider that operates a dam upstream of our site. Uptown had to forge a 30-year agreement to use the channel and their access roads. Uptown's acquisition of the dams made us property owners of the riverbed. The organization negotiated to transfer our river real estate to the City of Columbus upon the completion of the project. This resulted in leasing the river back to control any commercial activity on the waterway.

REPRESENTATION

For generations, most residents viewed the river as an industrial sewer. Recreational activities like swimming or boating were unheard of. The river was also considered an economically distressed area. After developing the river restoration plan, Uptown went far and wide to tell the story to local government, philanthropic groups, civic and social clubs, state leaders, corporate citizens and the public. Over time, more and more people caught the vision for the project. The river borders both Uptown Columbus, Georgia and downtown Phenix City, Alabama. That meant that Uptown carried its public education effort across two cities and two states. Uptown also had to obtain rafting agreements with both governments, which occurred after multiple City Council meetings and public votes. When deciding to offer ziplining, Uptown had to obtain public approval to lease city-owned land for towers to launch and receive customers. Ten years in, representation remains vital to the business side. Uptown runs an aggressive marketing campaign to attract customers by targeting demographic groups in Georgia, Alabama and Florida.

REPLICATION

While Uptown's dam acquisition was unique, any community with a river can leverage the waterway to build a strong outdoor brand. Communities without rivers can reclaim underused or overlooked areas by using similar tactics to envision and repurpose places like on-street parking spaces, traffic islands, warehouses, railyards and other fallow areas. Positioning downtown as an outdoor recreation center is also repeatable. Organizations can map urban bike paths, pocket parks and greenspaces in the district. Then, catalogue items like outdoor public art, historical markers and fountains. Lastly, track all races, fun-runs, exercise groups and other recreational activities. By connecting and marketing these assets as a unified amenity, the outdoor brand can emerge. Another lesson is to incrementally identify and address recreational gaps. As the outdoor stature grew, leaders saw that downtown lacked kid-friendly amenities. That led to a decision to build a playground, splashpad and disc golf course. Organizations can also follow Uptown's lead by looking beyond their traditional role. Because local government wanted to put equipment in other neighborhoods, Uptown took a pro-active approach to develop and own the assets itself. Leaders must have a candid conversation about stepping "out of its lane" to follow this approach.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

This project was unbelievably complicated. Developing the plan took almost ten years and the skills of multiple professionals. While maintaining a tenacious commitment is simple, sustaining the effort over the long-term is difficult. Building a whitewater course in a natural river is also complex. This is specialized work and finding a contractor was challenging. Uptown had to create temporary passageways for the water so crews could safely get in the riverbed to create the rafting channel. Although the fundraising goal was large, any IRS designated 501c3 nonprofit (like Uptown) should be able to easily accept donations. This allows donors to make tax deductible gifts. The legal process was daunting. To help shield the organization from potential injuries or lawsuits, the organization created a separate Limited Liability Corporation for the river operations. As the LLC generates income, the entity is a subsidiary, for-profit organization. Uptown also had to craft multiple contracts with two cities and an outfitter to run the rafting and zipline businesses. With more people in the river, Uptown also installed a complicated alarm system for public safety. It uses in-water sensors to broadcast an alarm to notify downstream users when the river is about to rise.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Great Family Adventure Show US Team Trials March 2023: https://youtu.be/jLS5K0s_x0U

Rushsouth Website (outdoor recreation assets and branding): <https://rushsouth.com/>

International Canoe Federation World Championship Finals: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0m__L5iwMig&t=15183s

Chattahoochee Unplugged (preview of hour long documentary about River Project): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S34dlq_sAz0