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Tunnell-Spangler-Walsh Designs Extraordinary Flat-Water Rowing Venue in Sarasota, Florida with Potential to Become One of the Finest Venues in the World

TSW Principal Thomas Walsh Creates Master Plan for Venue, Parkland, Amenities and Facilities, Generating Excitement in the Rowing Community

SARASOTA, FL. -- The visionaries among us look at the ordinary, but see the extraordinary. To paraphrase President Kennedy, instead of looking at things the way they are and asking why, visionaries dream of things that never were and ask, "why not?"

This is the question posed by forward-thinking business and civic leaders in Sarasota, Florida, about a 600-acre man-made lake adjacent to Nathan Benderson Park, just east of the city. Why not transform an ordinary body of water into one of the finest flat-water rowing venues in the world? The lake is ideally located along Interstate 75, and near hotels, restaurants and shopping facilities that can accommodate visitors and athletes. The surrounding parkland is large enough for additional year-round recreational amenities, as well as the facilities needed to support a flat-water rowing venue. Finally, and most importantly, the lake itself is, in the words of Bruce Smith, coach of the U.S. National Rowing Team, "a nearly perfect, flat-water lake that offers surprising promise."

To begin the transformation of the vision into reality, Sarasota's leadership turned to Thomas Walsh, founding principal of Tunnell-Spangler-Walsh & Associates, the Atlanta-based design and master-planning firm known for its New Urbanism communities. Walsh, a landscape architect, was already familiar to the rowing community since he designed the Kayak and Canoe Venue for the 1996 Summer Olympics held in and around Atlanta.

"There are very few landscape architects who understand the technology of how water behaves," said Smith, who also serves as executive director of the Community Rowing, Inc. "From the beginning, Tom personally visited and reviewed regattas and other courses and actively engaged the rowing community before he even put pencil to paper. He and his team were committed to meeting all of the FISA criteria during the design stage so the venue could be used for competition at the highest level. (FISA stands for Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Aviron in French, or the English equivalent, International Federation of Rowing Associations. It's the governing body of the sport of rowing.)

Walsh says the site offers both exceptional promise and challenges. "First, the lake is ideal for a rowing venue," said Walsh. "Originally the site was a gravel pit where materials for many Sarasota-area roads were excavated. Now, it's one of the largest bodies of fresh water in Sarasota County, and its size works well for rowing competitions. The other big advantage this lake has is that it is already protected

naturally from ocean breezes which can affect racers on a course. The topography of the surrounding parkland buffers the lake, which enables conditions to be consistent year-round.”

As for the challenges, Walsh, and his team from TSW’s Landscape Architecture Studio had to create an innovative design plan to accommodate all of the support facilities and amenities needed to support a World-Class competitive venue. They had to take into account viewing vistas, parking for cars and trailers, where to site a grandstand, restrooms, food service and more. Plus, the City wanted the park to include additional recreational options for year-round use.

“At first glance, it was easy to see that the natural areas surrounding the lake were not wide enough to accommodate the structures needed,” said Walsh. “We wanted the property to feature expansive green spaces with walking and cycling trails and lush landscaping, and didn’t want to block viewing vistas with buildings or hardscapes. We solved the problem by engineering a peninsula at the northeast corner of the lake. Here’s where we have placed the grandstand, which will provide a prime view of the rowing course’s finish line. The building will include restrooms and food service. Boat trailer parking will be behind the grandstand, near a new, state-of-the art boathouse. We’ve encircled the lake with a 5K hiking and biking trail and landscaped all of the property. There’s parking for athletes and spectators, areas to picnic, a volleyball court, fitness stations, water features, a butterfly garden, playground for kids, and much more. I think it’s going to be a tremendous asset for the Sarasota area and for the national rowing community,” said Walsh.

Bruce Smith agrees. “There are only a handful of top rowing venues in the country, and only one in North America that’s FISA-certified. I believe this new facility at Nathan Benderson Park has the potential to become the very best in the United States and perhaps even the world. I think Tom Walsh and his team at Tunnell-Spangler-Walsh captured the vision of the planning committee and enhanced it with their creativity and passion for the project. People are going to be talking about it for a long time to come.”

About Tunnell-Spangler-Walsh & Associates

Tunnell-Spangler-Walsh is a full-service planning, architecture and landscape architecture firm. The award-winning company was founded in Atlanta by Bill Tunnell, Jerry Spangler and Thomas Walsh in 1990 and specializes in developing sustainable communities, greenspaces, homes and commercial buildings. TSW is a leader in the New Urbanist movement and employs a community planning and design process that links tradition and context with today’s cultural and environmental demands. By integrating the disciplines of planning, landscape architecture and architecture, TSW delivers a continuum of design services to its clients, which has resulted in some of the Southeast’s most appealing and successful mixed-use communities, campuses, commercial buildings, resorts, streetscapes, homes and parks.

Sustainable design is an integral part of all TSW work, from the master plan level to the individual building components. Most of TSW's staff are LEED Accredited Professionals and their designs incorporate a range of ideas for progressive energy and resource saving solutions. For more information, visit www.tunspan.com.

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