

When The Atlantic City Aquarium Reopens, People Want More

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Matthew Strabuk - Press of Atlantic City

ATLANTIC CITY (August 1, 2023) - As “a fish person,” former city resident John King said he loved visiting aquariums at the different places he’s traveled, to learn more about the local marine life while exploring the various activities and exhibits they have to offer.

So King, 38, was disappointed when he noticed the Atlantic City Aquarium was closed Tuesday while he was fishing at the pier in Gardner’s Basin with his girlfriend.

But then, he was excited when he found out his hometown aquarium was reopening soon, with much needed improvements.

The Atlantic City Aquarium, which closed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and remained closed due to renovations, is tentatively set to reopen in the fall, according to its Facebook page.

“It’s in a great spot. This is a tourist location,” said King, who remembered coming to the aquarium with his dad when he was a 12-year-old boy.

During his quick trip away from Woodbury, Gloucester County, he noted the historic neighborhood had a park, boat rides, fishing, eateries and other amenities that draw people in.

“There’s plenty of people here, but people want to see more,” said King, who noted the small aquarium needed to provide more than a few local fish to keep visitors interested.

The Atlantic City Aquarium had about 17 exhibits for guests to enjoy. Some of the marine life people could see in those exhibits included fish from the Mid-Atlantic, Mullica River, exotic animals like bearded dragons, tropical animals like tree frogs or chameleons, along with eels, piranhas, jellyfish and sea turtles. The museum also had two touch tanks — one with baby sting rays, the other with tropical sharks — an exotic animal presentation and a live diver feeding show.

“When I was 12 it was a big deal, but now, not so much. You would think an aquarium by the ocean would be better than one on a riverfront in Camden. ... There’s so much more opportunity here,” said King. “People that come here with their families should be able to make a day out of it. Right now, it’s like a one-and-done spot, and there’s not enough to keep me there (at the aquarium).”

It’s been over 20 years since any major repairs have occurred at the aquarium, said the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs on its website. The aquarium opened in 1999.

Prior to its closure, the aquarium secured \$1.16 million from the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, which was part of a larger \$3.6 million grant Gardner’s Basin received from the DCA and New Jersey Green Acres for “much needed capital improvements,” said Andrew Kramer, the city’s spokesperson.

“Due to the pandemic, the normal process for moving such a project forward was slower than originally anticipated. Once construction began, it became apparent the damage and repairs were greater than expected,” said Kramer. “That, combined with the pandemic’s impact on supply chains, created delays in the renovation schedule.”

Work that’s been done since the building closed included adding new roofing, replacing old windows, flooring, tile, lighting, doors, drywall and a fresh paint job throughout. It also needed completely renovated bathrooms, work on the two-story building’s second floor, a new HVAC system and repairs to ducts, electrical systems and plumbing.

When the aquarium reopens, it will offer four new interactive touch tanks, including new shark and sting ray touch pools, said Kramer. Gardner’s Basin management handles everything exhibit related.

“The Atlantic City Aquarium is a first-class attraction, and while we move closer and closer to reopening, no exterior building siding aesthetic improvements were included in this project,” said Mayor Marty Small Sr. “We want to make sure the reopened aquarium looks good inside and out. To ensure we do this reopening right, we are in the process of making plans to improve the aesthetics of the building’s exterior and hope to announce a reopening date in the very near future.”

But for the aquarium to thrive, King said it needed more than an updated building, such as more aquatic attractions, interactive experiences and a greater variety of marine life.

Other city visitors like Gerrald Scott said the aquarium was “alright” for its size and easy to get through, but he admitted he was the kind of person who liked to zip through exhibits, which he did when he

visited the Louvre in Paris (It's impossible to see everything the Louvre has to offer in one day, say experts, but he did it in two hours). He said he wanted the museum to offer sharks, like great whites, and more shellfish, like sea mussels and clams.

But his wife, Jill Scott, said she enjoyed the low-key, quiet of the aquarium.

The "hidden gem" has a nice pathway for walks, lots of lush plants, trees and greenery that added to the old building's wooden exterior, as well as picnic tables for people to eat lunch while they overlook the bay.

City natives like Gerard Jasper also said the aquarium's originality should be preserved.

"It's multipurpose. I enjoyed my times that I was there," said Jasper, 59, who noted he was there once for a 20-year Atlantic City High School reunion. "I loved seeing the different sea life, learning about the different creatures and the accessibility of it. ... I learned a lot of stuff from the staff as well, who were tremendous teachers."

He said the size of the building was OK, but he wished the exhibits were larger or had some sort of additions and that the aquarium was better maintained to keep offering people different, new experiences that would keep marine life lovers coming back.

"I tell people all the time to visit the aquarium, away from the casinos. It's a family-friendly place," Jasper said. "But it doesn't help to have these places if they're not open."

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