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Marine Discovery Center aims to raise awareness of marine

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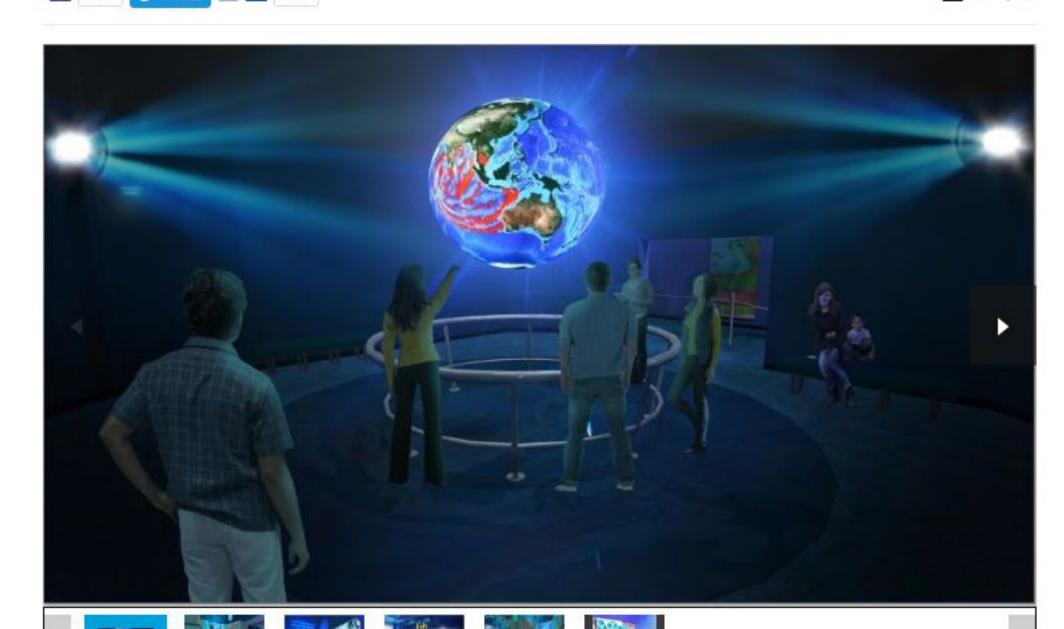
ERNANDEZ BAY VILLAGO

Where the sea is warm, the beer is cold, and shoes are never required!

research in St. Pete



Tampa Bay Times



ST. PETERSBURG - When the Pier Aquarium closed along with a handful of other businesses inside the infamous inverted pyramid building on St. Petersburg's waterfront, Mark Luther thought a new aquarium would be up and running in a new location within a year or two.

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the public face of the St. Pete Ocean Team."

of waterfront in downtown St. Petersburg.

But it's been almost four years since the pier closed, and the longtime aquarium has only just recently secured a new home Finally plans are moving forward for a marine research visitors center to open at the St. Pete Port.

"Surveys always indicated that the Columbia Restaurant and the aquarium were the primary reasons to go to the pier," remembers Luther, a director of the Ocean Monitoring and Prediction Lab in the University of South Florida College of Marine Science. "If you asked me four years ago, I would have never predicted we'd still be trying to reopen. A lot of unanticipated issues came up that slowed things down."

Beginning April 1, the revamped group behind the nonprofit, Pier Aquarium Inc., will begin renovating an 8,000-square-foot former visitors terminal at Port St. Pete. The group, which is supported by a number of volunteers from the marine science community in Pinellas County, signed a lease with the city of St. Petersburg in 2015 and the city and state contributed \$200,000 to renovate the terminal and relocate the port's security offices from the building. The center is expected to open within the year.

The St. Pete Ocean Team, which is an informal consortium made up of the 1,600 or so professionals who work in marine science or research industries in the St. Petersburg area, will populate the terminal with marine exhibits, which include fish and interactive touch tanks with exotic marine animals, coral reefs and digital learning displays. A new theater in the center will allow the center to play documentary and short films from the environmentallythemed Blue Ocean Film Festival.

Brilliant Creative Fabrication, an Orlando company known for creating exhibits for theme parks like Universal Studios, was hired to work with the ocean team to develop areas of the new center.

Some state and federal agencies, including the U.S. Coast Guard, NOAA and Florida Fish & Wildlife, are contributing, too.

The goal is to use the Marine Discovery Center as a gateway for visitors to learn about marine science in St. Petersburg.

"Most people in the city don't seem to have a clue that marine science is such a huge economic driver in the region," Luther said. "Our primary purpose is to try to coordinate activities and to be

It's a win-win for the small port of St. Pete, too, which has struggled to find viable uses for its waterfront property for years.

"Our port master plan calls for us to partner with the marine science community. We're finally implementing that now, and it will bring so much more activity and use to the port," said Walt Miller, the port's director. "We have the occasional yacht and a few cruise dinner boats that dock here, but we really want to build the port as a place for special events. We're looking for other opportunities, too."

The port underwent a \$5 million overhaul of the sea wall, wharf and utilities but still struggles to attract new business ventures. The port has also expanded its marketing budget to have a greater presence on social media and to send representatives to international boat and yacht shows.

Miller hopes that the introduction of the marine science facility will draw the attention of other businesses, like marine research vessels, to the port. If nothing else, he hopes it draws visitors to this specific stretch

"We've been hosting a food truck round up here once a month for nearly two years. It's exploded and brings people to this part of the city who otherwise wouldn't have come here," Miller said.

The center also aids in the development of the city's innovation district, which is focused on the marine

science companies in the area that employ around 1,800 people with an estimated local economic impact of \$251 million in gross county product.

The Pier Aquarium operated on the second and third floors of the pier for 25 years, where it served over 4 million visitors. The aquarium, which continued doing business under the name Secrets of the Sea after the pier closed, maintains the Rumfish Grill aquaria at the Guy Harvey Outpost Resort in St. Pete Beach and at the Tampa International Airport. The aquarium was set to reopen on John's Pass at Madeira Beach

Luther says the aquarium has been working with the city for years to get the port project moving forward.

after the pier shuttered but financial issues with landlords kept the deal from moving forward.

"The exhibits will be based on the research and technology that local members of the ocean team are doing," Luther said. "It's all about raising awareness."

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The Marine Discovery Center The Marine Discovery Center — formerly known as the Pier Aquarium, Inc. — will serve as the public

face for the marine research, technology and innovation taking place within The St. Petersburg Ocean Team, the consortium for marine science, oceanographic, and environmental research in St. Petersburg. The planned Marine Discovery Center will be open to visitors and offer interactive experiences, combining real-time scientific research, hands-on experiments and vibrant marine animals into fun and entertaining exhibits that encourage visitors to solve the intriguing mysteries found in the waters of our planet.

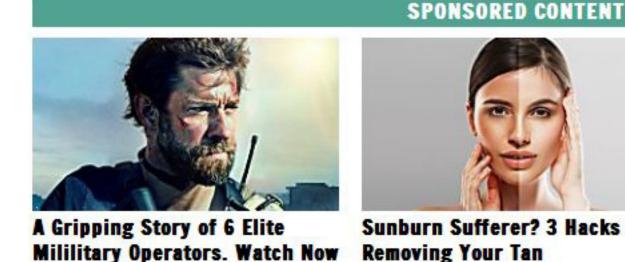
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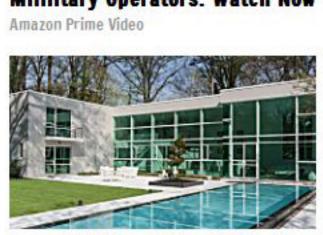
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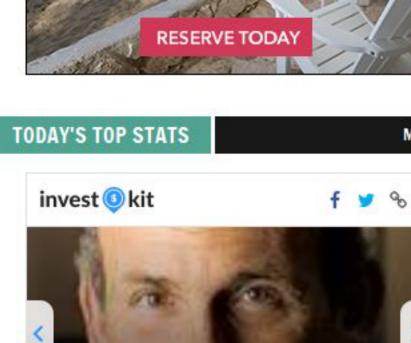




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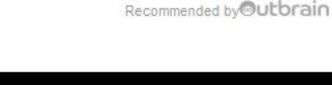




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