

# Park committee to now focus on improving downtown streetscape

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OF THE TRIBUNE & GEORGIAN STAFF

Joe Petrich offered residents and business owners a different look at downtown St. Marys last Thursday, and it was one they didn't particularly like.

"It's kind of stark," said Jim Gant.

What Petrich showed the St. Marys Park Committee and others Aug. 23 was the downtown he had seen during the months he had spent in St. Marys working on the Howard Gilman Memorial Park.

Long, unbroken stretches of parking spaces baking in the sun. Sidewalks with no shade, no place to sit, not much room to stroll and not much appeal. Intersections where one wide swath of gray paving meets another wide swath of gray.

Petrich, vice president and senior landscape architect with the Genesis Group in Jacksonville, Fla., which designed the new waterfront park, made his pitch during the public meeting that that view of St. Marys can be changed.

"There are ways of making it a more aesthetic and pleasing place to walk," said Petrich.

The way of doing it, he said, is through streetscaping — the choice and placement of what's on, in or facing a city's or neighborhood's streets and sidewalks.

Streetscaping includes a wide variety of elements and options — using trees, plants, awnings and benches; deciding what paving materials to use and what patterns to place them in; lights and where they're installed; placing traffic islands, sidewalks and trees to break up large paving areas; controlling the amount and placement of park-

ing spaces and exploiting sidewalks to their fullest.

"It's like furniture in your house," Petrich said.

Enhancing the downtown streetscape, said Petrich, exploits the same desire to have a vibrant, attractive place to go and walk at night that the park has tapped into.

"People are walking around the park because it is a pleasing experience," he said. "There's no reason why we should turn our back on this kind of walkable experience [for the rest of downtown.]"

And that desire to go walking could be a falling domino that rejuvenates downtown.

"The more we create in downtown, the more people there are in downtown and the more businesses there will be," said Gant.

The enhancements also could fit into and should be coordinated, suggested many at the meeting, with efforts the National Park Service is making to refurbish its holdings in downtown, including the Bachlott House, whose exterior recently was renovated.

Other park plans call for the addition of awnings and other design features to the facade of the Cumberland Island National Seashore Museum, possibly within this fiscal year, and for construction of a new park visitors center to start some time in 2003.

The park committee wanted to hold the meeting, said Gant, to discuss whether, given the success of the new park, the committee should continue and widen its scope from the park to the overall appearance of downtown.

"Is there a possibility that we should take a bigger view of our downtown?" he asked.

## Downtown Enhancement Committee

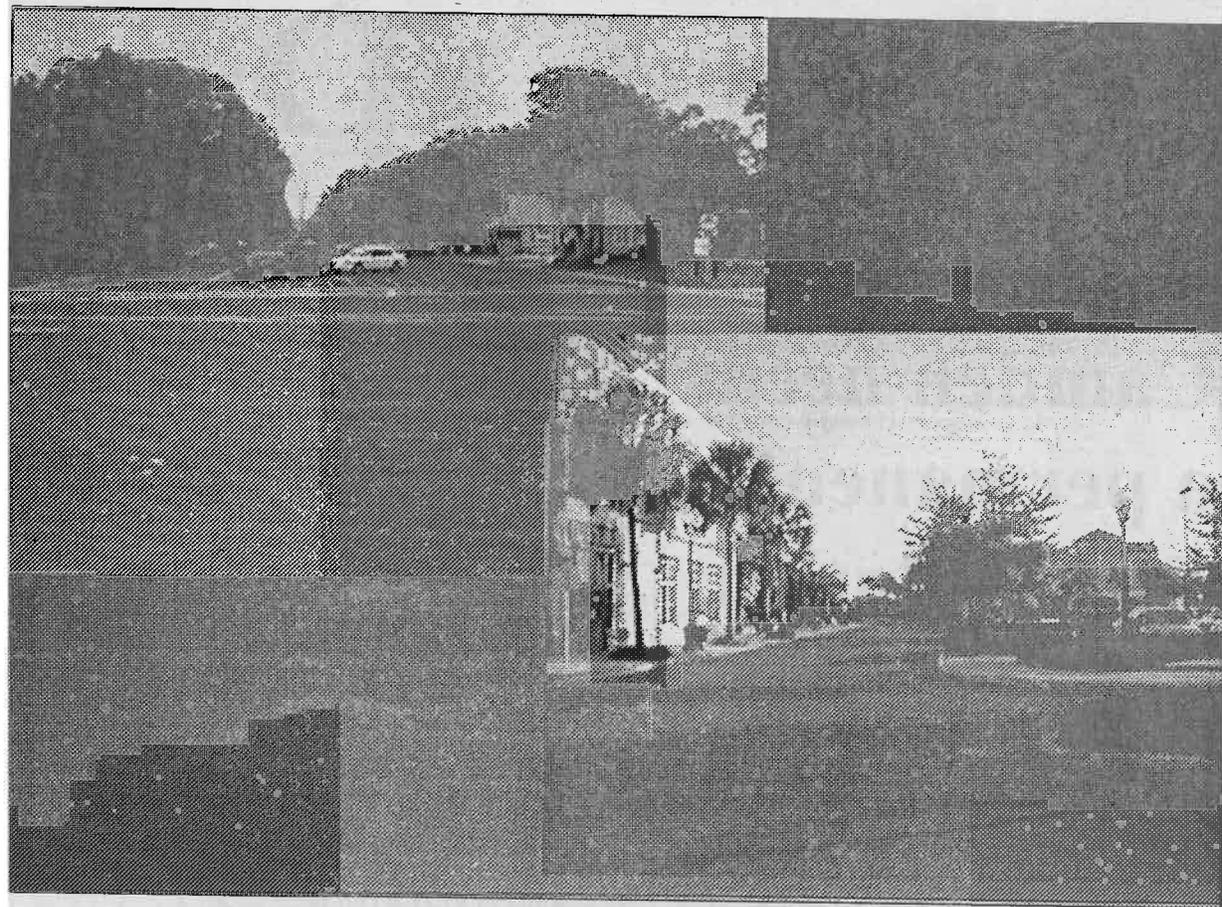
Bill Creed  
Jim Gant  
Teddie Lockhart  
John Love  
Lila McDill  
Len Scullion  
Jim Sullivan  
Peggy Trader  
Doug Vaught

Gant suggested that the park committee, as a downtown enhancement committee, could do for the St. Marys streetscape what it had done for the park — hold public meetings to hear from the public what they'd like to see downtown look like; work to come up with designs; figure out how much it's going to cost and then go looking for the money to do it.

"If you can get a consensus of the public, then get the elected officials to back the program and agree on a design, there are monies out there to be had," said Gant.

City Manager Mike Mahaney suggested that the best place to start going after funds to further transform downtown St. Marys was in the next Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) referendum.

Mahaney said that the city had used SPLOST funds to leverage other funding to accomplish much of what had been done in the park, and said that since St. Marys and Kingsland



**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT JOE** Petrich showed a series of slides last Thursday comparing street vistas in downtown St. Marys with other cities to illustrate what streetscaping can do. In this slide, the intersection of Wheeler and St. Marys streets (upper left) is shown in contrast to an intersection in another city where traffic stands with plants, a sidewalk, trees and other plants have been used to minimize the view of parked cars and break up the expanse of asphalt. (Tribune & Georgian photo/Amelia A. Hart)

residents now form a majority of the residents in Camden County, they had the power at the polling place to control what was done with the next SPLOST.

"I don't see any way to do [streetscape enhancement] if we don't obtain what we see as our fair share of SPLOST money," said Mahaney. "That has been the engine that driven these improvements. And unless you want a substantial tax increase, it's going to have to be the engine that drives improvements in the future."

The first step, said Gant last

week, is finding out whether city officials want the park committee to turn its attention to streetscape enhancement.

This week, the city gave its

answer, voting unanimously Monday evening to reactivate the park committee and changing its name to the Downtown Enhancement Committee.