

# Oak Ridge's Heritage Tourism Plan

*(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 15, 2012)*

I have published several *Historically Speaking* columns on Oak Ridge and Heritage Tourism in the past. These columns have promoted the idea that we are missing a potential source of revenue and economic development by not focusing more on the historical fact that Oak Ridge is UNIQUELY equipped by fate to attract heritage tourists to our Manhattan Project history and the tremendous technological advances that have resulted over the ensuing years.

With the potential of a Manhattan Project National Historical Park that includes Oak Ridge, that Heritage Tourism potential grows even more practical. I have been pleased to be included in the efforts to establish that park and have been pleased to see our Mayor Tom Beehan and other elected officials actively supporting the initiative.

The bill, HR 5987 in the House of Representatives and S 3300 in the Senate that will establish the park may be passed in the next congress. The House bill has already proven it has the majority needed to pass in the full house although it lacked the two thirds majority to pass it out of committee under special rules.

Jim DiPeso, Policy Director, ConservAmerica, writing regarding Congressman Dennis Kucinich's opposition to the park, "The Manhattan Project is a compelling and complex story that surely rises to the level of commemoration and interpretation as a national park. Congress should pass the park authorizing legislation, then get out of the way and let the National Park Service do the interpretation job it does so well."

Opposition such as that from Congressman Kucinich is in the minority. Our Tennessee delegation strongly supports the park. I was pleased to see Senator Alexander provide written testimony in favor of the bill in the Senate and was even more pleased that Congressman Chuck Fleischmann tapped me to testify on the House bill. So our elected officials stand in strong support of the bill.

A key to being prepared for the implementation of the Manhattan Project National Park, Oak Ridge location, is to be ready to move out positively when the decisions are made. The city's elected officials are the primary source of decisions that determine where we focus our collective attention. Thus, it is important for each of us to vote on November 6, 2012, for the individuals who understand and support progress along these lines and other progressive directions for our city. What a great system is our democracy.

I welcome any candidate or incumbent who is running for reelection to city council to convey their thoughts to me for inclusion in future *Historically Speaking* columns regarding this subject. Charlie Hensley has reached out to me to assure me that Heritage Tourism is high on his agenda for the city. Send input to [draysmith@comcast.net](mailto:draysmith@comcast.net), please.

Charlie has worked for 29 years at the Department of Energy sites, all of them. He has taken a lead role to support the Manhattan Project National Historical Park and spoken out in support of it as well as other historic preservation efforts such as the Alexander Inn. He was a strong supporter of the Jackson Square Enhancement Grant. I know other incumbents who are running for re-election, such as Chuck Hope and Ellen Smith, also support Heritage Tourism ideas and share Charlie's desire to see advances in this area. Again, I have asked each of these incumbents to comment on their positions as well as Trina Baughn and Kelly Callison.

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I am not sure of the positions of the two other candidates, Trina Baughn and Kelly Callison. If either or both of them will please send me their thoughts on historic preservation and Heritage Tourism, I will gladly include their positions in a future *Historically Speaking* column. Of course, I would welcome input from Chuck and Ellen as well.

So, what is our background in Heritage Tourism? Let's take a closer look at the reality.

Published in June 2007, *Creating the Living Story of "The Secret City" – A Heritage Tourism Plan to Significantly Expand Oak Ridge Annual Visitations*, was the culmination of a study of the potential Oak Ridge has to capitalize on its heritage to attract tourists. It is a report prepared by AkinsCrisp Public Strategies in partnership with the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau, the City of Oak Ridge, and the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University. Graphic support and rough order of magnitude costs for selected assets was provided by Cockrill Design & Planning. World War II era photographs used were from the Ed Westcott Collection.

The report is divided into seven segments including an introduction titled *Oak Ridge Is*, an *Executive Summary*, *Eight Key Strategies that Tell the Story*, *Where to Tell the Story: Our Physical Assets*, *Why the Story's Important* and *Appendix*.

The following is found in the introduction, *Oak Ridge is*: "The place where citizens and scientists worked together, forging the tools that would protect American democracy from its most serious threats ever; Where our greatest minds mastered the science and technology of nuclear energy to open new worlds in medicine, environmental sciences, chemistry, and physics; and, where residents transformed America's most secret city into a modern thriving community, with its own distinctive cultural, educational, and recreational treasures. "

"The story of Oak Ridge is almost unimaginable in today's world. The dedication, sacrifice, commitment, financial cost, and sheer genius that allowed Oak Ridge to develop a nuclear bomb and pioneer the nuclear sciences as part of the Manhattan Project are on an unprecedented scale, before and since. The ordinary citizens that propelled Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Los Alamos, New Mexico; and Hanford, Washington into international recognition become extraordinary during an era that demanded their time, resources, and strength. Our goal is to tell this story in a manner that does justice to the 'greatest generation' that dedicated so much to this nation and the world, and utilize Oak Ridge's amazing history and resources to increase the city's economic development through heritage tourism.

"Key stakeholders in Oak Ridge have already made a significant commitment toward making this goal a reality. The purpose of this document is to build upon their previous phases of work, which laid a strong foundation for tapping into Oak Ridge's heritage tourism potential. This report provides practical, cost-effective strategies and specific action items that, if implemented, will increase heritage tourism and visitation in Oak Ridge and the surrounding region.

The *Executive Summary* states that a timely heritage tourism project is important to Oak Ridge "Because heritage tourism has a direct economic impact on the financial success, identity, and continued viability of the city."

There are "***Eight realistic, cost-effective key strategies***" and they are listed as,

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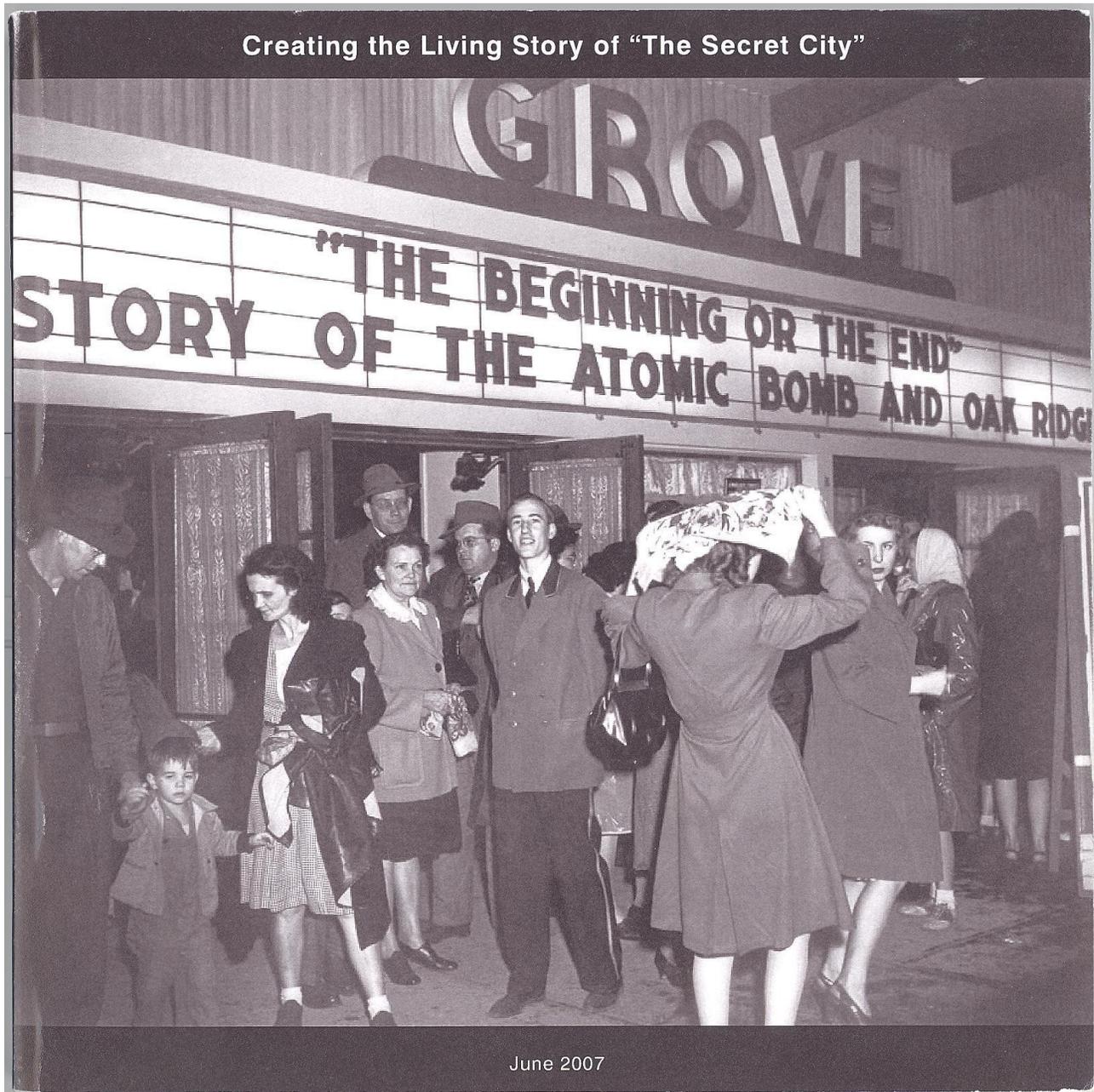
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- “1. **Upgrade signage and wayfinding** (develop complete signage and wayfinding system, incorporating interstate signage leading to Oak Ridge, better signage on state and county roads, and add to existing city signage program that links major heritage tourism sites);
2. **Focus on the American Museum of Science and Energy and Historic Jackson Square** (Consider renaming the museum adding oak Ridge to the name, renovating the museum's exterior, expanding interpretation through new exhibits, kiosks, and educational material, and evaluate enhancements that would maximize Jackson square's potential as a vital tourist and retail hub);
3. **Showcase the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge Heritage Assets** (Design and install a series of interpretive kiosks in sites across Oak Ridge, emphasizing oral history and films by Keith McDaniel);
4. **Develop 'Secret City' branding and marketing** (Develop an integrated and focused campaign that ties materials together, creating a recognized 'brand' and personalized story line that links them together visually and historically);
5. **Create a more robust Oak Ridge Convention and visitors Bureau** (Provide the ORCVB with 100% of the hotel/motel tax collections and use these funds to increase staff to expand their tourism and marketing capabilities, develop a new website, and provide additional training for staff and volunteers);
6. **Determine the most appropriate NPS designation for Oak Ridge, e.g. National Heritage Area, and evaluate benefits, cost, and time required to achieve designation** (Evaluate the benefits and challenges associated with the process necessary to obtain a National Park Service designation and determine if this strategy will help Oak Ridge);
7. **Highlight Signature Facilities** (Support on-going efforts by organizations and individuals to develop K-25, Y-12, and others as heritage tourism and education sites);
8. **Undertake a strategic Outreach Campaign** (create a carefully targeted, thoughtfully developed, and reasonably priced press campaign to maximize the best opportunities for exposure in the region.

So, were do we stand five years later? This plan is even more important now than it was in 2007 with the impending Manhattan Project National Historical Park likely to become a reality in the not too distant future.

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Heritage Tourism Plan published in June 2007 – is it an active guiding document for advancing Oak Ridge?