

DOWNTOWN SOUTHPORT INC. (DSI) HAS A NEW PRESIDENT

Articles by the State
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Article Courtesy of The State Port Pilot, Bob Liepa, Staff Writer:

'DSI 2.0' has new president, structure, lots of events: When the City of Southport closed Franklin Square Park temporarily on Dec. 21, 2023, some people may have figured that effectively shut down Downtown Southport, Inc. (DSI). The nonprofit organization held many of its annual events there, and announce it was suspending its outdoor market and festivals for 2024.

Any rumors of DSI's demise, however, were premature. DSI has a new president, new structure and several upcoming events.

"At that time, we kind of saw the direction the city was going in for what was going to be available to us," DSI President Randy Jones said. "So we knew that we needed to become 'DSI 2.0' Jones was elected last October to a two-year-term as president, succeeding Peggy Popelars, who had been the organization's first and only president for 17 years.

The challenge facing DSI, which was comprised of about 100 members, was essentially to adapt or fall by the wayside. DSI chose the former. "We were dormant, almost, in 2024, and so during that year, because we couldn't use Franklin Square Park, we were talking about how do we change because the way we were before, it's not working anymore," said Popelars, who is now DSI Treasurer.

Community get involved:

Shortly after Jones took over the presidency, the new DSI began to take shape.

"When we lost that ability to use that (park) for our events, we kind of re-evaluated what DSI's structure would be," Jones said, "and in review and discussions with the board, we really saw the opportunity to change from membership to a service organization, which really does open us up to more people becoming involved because everyone is welcome to sit at our table, to be part of DSI, to help with the quality of life of Southport."

"You don't have to be a member to help with what we do in our organization, with events, with the different opportunities that we have for the community to be involved. We're not limiting that to members. We are inviting all the community to get involved with what we're doing." Jones compared the organization's transformation to the blueprint for a house. "We had a way we did it," he said. "We just had to remodel a little bit, renovating."

\$210,000 for projects: Jones's history with DSI goes back to even before its beginning, when he served as the city's tourism director. It was 2006 when the Merchants Association met with him to organize a joint, nonprofit organization. Jones helped to write the group's first articles of incorporation.

DSI was formed in 2007. It started out with a paid part-time executive director, but by 2011 it was an all-volunteer independent organization, said Popelars. Its mission is to "preserve Southport's heritage, encourage and support preservation projects, cultural events, educational programs and tourism." DSI is governed by an 11-member board of directors that meets monthly. Among its current directors are three former city aldermen - Paul Fisher, Emily Humphreys and Mary Ellen Poole.

DSI said since its creation it has contributed or donated over \$210,000 for projects in the downtown Southport area. A \$25,000 Duke Energy Hometown Revitalization Grant was awarded to DSI in 2021 to help small businesses recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and over 30 small businesses in Southport benefited from the grant, according to DSI.

"We've touched so much of Southport, and a lot of it quietly," said Jones. "We haven't gone away" DSI has events coming up, starting with the Southport Arts MAY-nia planned for Saturday, May 17, at the Brunswick Community College campus in Southport. Thursday evening concerts in Franklin Square Park will be held May 29 through August 28 (except for July 3).

DSI sponsors the North Carolina Fourth of July Festival's Naturalization Ceremony on July 3 at the Fort Johnston/Garrison Lawn, and the Winterfest Flotilla will sail along the Cape Fear River in front of the Southport waterfront on Dec. 13. In addition, Jones said the organization is planning a fundraising event for the fall.

Brunswick Community College, Southport Garden Club, Southport Unity Committee, Caswell Avenue Community Garden, the City of Southport, Up Your Arts, Cape Fear Radio and the Cape Fear Yacht Club are co-sponsoring some of these events. "A lot of people in the community think DSI has just gone away," Popelars said. "We haven't gone away. We have a whole year of things that we're doing and we're still co-sponsoring". "All these things that are part of the patchwork of a quilt that makes Southport, we've helped design that, and I think it's something that we're very proud of," Jones said.

Downtown Southport Inc. (DSI) has a new President by Southport Magazine

After serving as president of Downtown Southport Inc. (DSI) for 17 years, Peggy Popelars has handed over the gavel to Randy Jones. Popelars will remain as DSI's Treasurer. Comments from Peggy Popelars, Former DSI President:

It has been an honor and pleasure to serve DSI as the President for the past 17 years. Over these past years, DSI has contributed over \$210,000 to the downtown area of Southport for projects to support our Mission to "preserve Southport's heritage, encourage and support preservation projects, cultural events, educational programs and tourism". A \$25,000 Duke Energy Hometown Revitalization Grant was applied for and was awarded to Downtown Southport Inc (DSI) in 2021 to help small businesses recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 30 small businesses in Southport benefitted from the Grant.

Under Randy Jones's leadership, Downtown Southport Inc. (DSI) will continue to thrive and continue to be able to support our Mission. Comments from Randy Jones, DSI's new President:

As we welcome the Spring Season and I start my term of President of DSI, I would like to let you in on all the exciting things that we have planned for 2025. We will be sending out quarterly newsletters to keep you up to date. The DSI Board of Directors has voted to change our By-Laws from a paid membership to a volunteer service organization. This decision was made because we believe that our mission should give the opportunity for everyone to "sit at the table" and to get involved. DSI has worked and will continue to work hard to enhance the quality of life for Southport and believe that anyone who is interested in volunteering should have the opportunity to be a part of making DSI even stronger as it works to benefit the whole community.

As our calendar for 2025 shows we have a full year ahead! We are still active in our co-sponsoring events we have helped with in the past: Concerts in the Park, The Naturalization Ceremony that is part of the 4th of July Festival and the Winterfest Flotilla. DSI will also continue to support the Up Your Arts Banner Project and the Southport Boat Show.

We are excited to announce some new events that will take place this year. In collaboration with other non-profits and Brunswick Community College, DSI will be co-sponsoring the Southport Arts MAY-nia event on May 17th. DSI is also in the development stage of planning with others a major event in the Fall. These new events are ways in which DSI, in conjunction with partner organizations will provide opportunities for everyone to enjoy the area and give DSI a chance to shine and do what it does best....Put On A Great Event.

Now, we ask that you learn about us, join us in support of the activities and events we help with and get involved as volunteers as DSI continues to make Southport the place that we love.

I am looking forward to the next two years as DSI President and can not wait to see what else we all can do!