

# The Augusta Chronicle

## Scuttlebiz: Barberitos reopens with a new look

Damon Cline

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It's been 15 years since the opening of the **Barberitos** near the Augusta Exchange shopping center. It was time for a change.

The fast-casual burrito bistro has reopened after a short closure for a reconstruction that has upgraded the Agerton Lane eatery from top to bottom.

The comprehensive remodel includes all new kitchen equipment, salsa bar, countertops, dining room tables, chairs and new restrooms.

But the *pièce de résistance* is a new wall mural that includes elements unique to the city, such as the Savannah River, the Masters Tournament and the historic downtown, among other embedded details.

“The Barberitos Augusta team is excited about the updates to the restaurant, so we can better serve our guests,” said Barberitos Founder & CEO **Downing Barber**. “We appreciate being part of the Augusta landscape for 15 years and look forward to serving the community for many more.”

**DAM THAT'S GOOD:** I've never chimed in on the **New Savannah Bluff Lock and Dam** before.

That's somewhat surprising because it arguably has more impact on Augusta-Aiken's economy and quality of life than any single structure in the metro area, except for possibly Thurmond Dam.

The 83-year-old lock and dam is what makes the Savannah River look impressive in downtown Augusta and North Augusta, both of whom have sunk hundreds of millions of dollars into riverfront developments in recent decades.

Without the lock and dam's gates impounding the river into a slackwater pool, the Savannah would look like a narrow channel surrounded by exposed piers and boat docks sitting on mud flats.

I never felt comfortable weighing in on the **Army Corps of Engineers** plan to tear the structure down and replace it with a pile of rocks (which would make the river resemble what was described in the previous paragraph) because it was too much of a moving target.

For a while, the story seemed to evolve on an almost daily basis. And there were too many actors involved, from bureaucrats and environmentalists to city officials and congressional leaders to lawyers and even more bureaucrats.

But now it's different. The New Savannah Bluff Lock and Dam appears to have a future – a future in the hands of locals.

A “deal” is being hammered out in which the federal government would provide \$53 million for repairs, maintenance and ongoing operations by a group representing Aiken County and the cities of Augusta and North Augusta.

The deal, which is in the form of an amendment to the Water Resources Development Act of 2020, would also provide \$22 million for the **Georgia Ports Authority** to create a fish habitat so the endangered Atlantic sturgeon has a place to spawn downriver from the lock and dam.

You may recall the entire argument for tearing down the lock and dam – aside from the Army Corps of Engineers seeking to remove the aging structure from its portfolio – was to mitigate harm to the fish caused by deepening the Savannah port.

Tearing down the dam, which the Corps was on schedule to do this year, and replacing it with a pile of rocks would allegedly allow the fish (a creature that seems to be elusive as the Loch Ness Monster) make its way to its historic spawning grounds in the shoals upriver from Augusta.

Under this new plan, the fish won't have to travel as far. And we still get to keep our nice, big, beautiful river.

A few thoughts:

1) South Carolinians have never got the credit they deserve for saving the lock and dam. It was Aiken County officials such as State Representatives **Bill Hixon** and **Tom Young** who went to **Gov. Henry McMaster** and convinced Attorney General **Alan Wilson** to file a lawsuit against Corps in November 2019. The lawsuit is what turned the tide; the Corps could ignore local officials' protestations, but it couldn't ignore a federal lawsuit. The city of Augusta joined in on the lawsuit as a me-too the following month.

2) The plaintiffs were smart to not allow the **Savannah Riverkeeper** organization from joining in. The environmental group has wanted to see the dam removed from day one. So there was no point in letting it be privy to legal strategies to save it. City officials and business leaders have finally woke up to the realization that the environmental group's vision for the river does not match their own.

3) Locals will be able to operate and maintain the lock and dam better than the federal government. We actually have a vested interest in the structure. The dam's original purpose – to serve as a passage for commercial ships – ended in the late 1970s, which is probably around the time the Corps' stopped caring about preventative maintenance.

4) The Georgia Ports Authority is finally simpatico with the upriver coalition of lock and dam proponents. For a while there, it blindly followed whatever the Corps wanted so long as it meant their precious port could be deepened.

5) The Corps has long wanted to walk away from the lock and dam, and now it is finally getting its wish (though not in the manner it had hoped). That is overall a good thing for taxpayers, as the Corps *should* get out of the civilian waterways business. In fact, the Cato Institute has a compelling argument for why the entire agency should be disbanded.

This agreement being worked out is not yet set in stone, so a lot can happen between now and when the dotted line is signed.

But you can take my word on this: The New Savannah Bluff Lock and Dam is not going to be demolished. And the riverfronts of downtown Augusta and North Augusta are going to look the same for your children and grandchildren.

See, 2020 hasn't been all bad news.

**LOCAL BOY DOES GOOD:** Ever notice how those statewide “top 10,” “top 40” and “best of” lists rarely include anyone living outside the Interstate 285 loop?

Yeah, I know 60% of the state lives in metro Atlanta, but it wouldn't hurt to peer out beyond the smog once in a while to see what's going on out here in the hinterlands.

At least Augusta had a small victory recently when **Meybohm Real Estate's John D. Cates** was named one of the “40 under 40 Class of 2020” list compiled by the **University of Georgia Alumni Association**.

The firm's chief operating officer and general counsel was recognized for “personal, professional and philanthropic achievements” for a graduate under 40.

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Cates spent plenty of time there, earning a bachelor's degree in 2007, an MBA in 2011 and a Juris Doctor in 2012.

His dad, **Doug Cates**, is no slouch either. He's a partner in the Augusta office of accounting and consulting firm **Cherry Bekaert**, and a member of downtown advocacy group **Augusta Tomorrow**.

**MORE PEOPLE IN THE NEWS:** If you work in a leadership capacity at any one of the major manufacturers in Augusta, there's a good chance you've met **Cheney Thomasson**.

The **Augusta Economic Development Authority** existing industry coordinator is there to make sure you have everything you need to keep your operations running and – hopefully – expanding.

Thomasson has done such a good job building relationships with the city's industrial community that she's going to be working with all key businesses and organizations in the city.

Her promotion to “Manager of Existing Industry and Strategic Partnerships” means she'll now work with corporate citizens, educational organizations and other local, national and regional entities that may have Augusta in mind for business location or expansion.

“Cheney has worked hard to facilitate growth of our existing industries here in Augusta,” Augusta EDA President **Cal Wray** said. “We are thrilled to see her continue to work with our local industry partners while adding a focus on building strategic partnerships to further our influence and impact.”

**DID YOU MISS ME?:** My apologies for not filing a column in last week's edition. I've been busy working on the summer edition of **1736** magazine which, if you are a print subscriber, will appear in your Sunday paper on Aug. 23.

My last-minute attempt to write a column – which addressed the underlying economic issues of the “defund the police” movement – was not published because I, and others, later determined it strayed from “news analysis” territory into “opinion page” material, which is not what Scuttlebiz is all about.

Perhaps I'll take another look at it and make some revisions. It's not like the anti-police movement is going away any time soon. Sadly.

**SECOND WAVE:** “Lockdowns” and “self quarantines” are *so* yesterday. Now the coronavirus talk is all about the “second wave.”

**JPMorgan**, which analyzes 30 million Chase credit cards, found that increased spending in restaurants has correlated with the increased rise in COVID-19 infections. (Restaurant spending is considered a good overall predictor of other credit card spending.) JPMorgan's finding was confirmed by **Zenreach**, a data firm tracking in-store traffic through cell phones.

Nationally, from May 1 to July 15, Zenreach saw a 68.8% increase in restaurant foot traffic. During the same period, coronavirus cases increased 122.3%

In Georgia, according to Zenreach's year-to-date data, the number of COVID-19 cases and consumer traffic appeared to reach parity in late April. After that, consumer traffic kept rising with the number of cases kept falling until right around mid-June.

That's when cases started going trough the roof. Right around the last week of June the number of cases shot above foot traffic figures for the first time. Correlation does not imply causation – as so many geeks like to point out – but I don't think it takes a Ph.D. to see that people mixing with each other without masks increases the caseload of an infectious disease.

**HOMEBOUND:** I haven't been to a bar or restaurant since mid-March, and I don't plan to any time soon. I'm no so worried about *me* getting sick as much as I am at making other people sick (such as my older siblings, my in-laws, elderly friends, etc.).

You can have COVID-19 and not even know it. So if you love someone who is part of a vulnerable population, you should be taking all protocol advice and stop looking at precautions through a political lens.

Feel free to drive without a seatbelt if you want to (because the life you risk is only your own), but if you're going to be around others in public, just wear a dang mask. It's not about you, it's about everyone else.

**HOMEWORK:** Is working from home working out for you? A recent survey of remote workers showed 67% of them saying their productivity is the same or better when working from home.

That same study, by the way, shows 42% report they are working “less than usual” at home. That either means some of that 67% are lying, or that a good portion of people are able to do their jobs more efficiently at home, where there are no staff meetings, water cooler chit-chat and other workplace distractions.

Think about how much time you spend getting ready for work each morning. Then add in your commute time. For me, that ends up being a solid 45 minutes. And that's 45 minutes I don't have to waste while working from home (unless I'm having a Zoom meeting that day, in which case I need five minutes to comb my hair and put a shirt on).

About 33% of respondents say they are working more while 25% say they are working about the same. The most interesting number in the survey involves the time people work – 77% said they are working different hours. So normal 9-to-5ers are maybe working 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., or 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

A whopping 92% of respondents said they believe their boss trusts them to work at home, but 86% of people said they've "taken advantage of their freedom" while working remotely.

I don't exactly know what "taking advantage" of freedom entails, but if it's working at a computer while wearing gym shorts, I'm guilty as charged.