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LINES IN THE SAND

Shoreline Master Prog Update sparks debates about Tacoma's future

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Business Examiner

As the Shoreline Master Prog Update deadline approaches for cities within King, Pierce and Thurston counties, some lines are being drawn in the sand — both literally and figuratively.

Tacoma's update is a prime example of how discussions can heat up, as vested parties try to push forward their visions for the future of the waterfront.

At the heart of the debate is the Planning Commission's recommendation to extend the S-6 Ruston Way district southward to include the Sperry Ocean Terminals' property.

S-6 designation is primarily for water enjoyment and recreational uses. The properties are currently zoned for industrial use. Many of those involved argue they should remain so because of the deep water in the area. They say rezoning could have dramatic impacts on Sperry's operations.

Those who oppose a zoning change also argue that it could negatively impact jobs in Tacoma and send a message to employers that the city isn't business-friendly.

However, there are many people who have advocated for a zoning change — which would make it possible to build a walking trail. They believe the trail is the missing link in plans to connect Tacoma Dome to Point Defiance.

Middle ground

But not every point of view on this subject can be tucked neatly into one of those groups.

"It seems to me these two sides are talking past each other," said Anne Wessells, assistant professor in Urban Studies at University of Washington Tacoma. "I think there is a middle ground we are not hearing from. We are hearing a little bit from them, but they are more like a whisper in this chorus of extreme opposite ends of the debate."

Wessells is working on a paper, "On the Working Waterfront," in which she examines five sites in Washington that do a good job of balancing industrial and pedestrian needs.

"I don't think Tacoma as a community has looked forward to what they want the waterfront to be like in 10, 15, 20 years, and how these uses can co-exist," she said. "Can you have industry and people co-exist? Maybe there is an opportunity for Tacoma to really take a lead on this."

Amy DeDominicis, an architect with Tacoma Design Collaborative, said she is excited about the possibilities for the waterfront. But she doesn't think the current discussion will result in capturing the best ideas.

"It's very polarized," she said. "For me, as an architect, we are taught to listen to both sides — what can you do to get both sides to take a leap? Really great ideas come out of people being together in the same room."

While Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber has taken an active stand against the zoning changes, its president and CEO, Tom Pierson, would like to see an urban planner develop a strategic plan for how the Dome to Point Defiance Trail could be constructed.

"There's got to be a way to make that happen without taking these businesses away," he said. "It's our community. How do we accomplish both goals of this and move together?"

Pierson said it appears some of the parties involved aren't looking for a compromise.

"It's one or the other," he said. "That's what's frustrating to me. It's not an either or. I'm excited about how we can get

there."

Lara Herrmann, president of Walk the Waterfront and a local attorney, agrees that this is not an all or nothing situation.

"Cities that remain stagnant have that type of opinion. The cities that move forward are able to meet that middle ground. It's not a question of either or — it's both," she said. "How do we blend both of these priorities and move forward and excel? If we do that, then we would ignite this passion and enthusiasm for the city and everybody wins. We are not against anybody. We are for creating the best use for the waterfront."

Jobs

With Washington still reporting an unemployment rate above 9 percent, it isn't necessarily surprising that one of the biggest points of disagreement involves jobs.

At a Sept. 27 public hearing about the Shoreline Master Prog Update, union members packed into Tacoma City Council chambers.

"We don't want to see any adjustments made to the Shoreline Master Plan that would change any of the shoreline zoning, especially in the (Sperry) area," said Mike Elliott of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen. "We think it sends the wrong message to those seeking to do business in Tacoma. Are we open for business here in Tacoma or not?"

But proponents of the change said if the city can finish the Dome to Defiance Trail, it will bring national attention to Tacoma and improve the quality of life for the area's residents.

"The whole host of comments talking about jobs don't really make a sense to me," said David Rietmann, who lives near Stadium Way. "I don't see it as a jobs issue."

He said the trail system would show off Tacoma's best asset — the waterfront — and eventually attract new businesses.

However, even proponents of the trail system admit that there are no solid plans for building the footpath at this point. So, even if the zoning change was approved, it doesn't mean the trail will be completed anytime soon.

But Herrmann would argue that because the Shoreline Master Prog Update is a planning document, it would be irresponsible not to be forward-thinking and progressive.

Scott Mason, president of Tacoma Local 23 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union said what everyone should be striving for is the "most amount of public access, with the ability to still use those assets for maritime use."

And while some people argue that not many jobs would be lost if Sperry were to close or move elsewhere, Mason said the zoning changes could impact other businesses.

For example, he said some proponents of the zoning changes want the expansion of S6 to also include Temco, which is the largest single-employer of longshoremen in Tacoma.

So, while Mason supports the idea of a Dome to Defiance trail, he argues that it should not "be at a cost that it ends up killing jobs."

Not neighborly

It's hard to discuss the Shoreline Master Prog Update without diving into the relationships among industrial businesses and their nearby neighborhoods. Residents claim that the vessels parked at Sperry's docks have — among other things — released black ash into the community.

"The neighborhood has had chronic issues with the ships," the residential neighbor, Rietmann said. "We don't think any appropriate actions have been taken on the part of the ship owner or the parties that are supposed to monitor these inappropriate releases."

However, there isn't much evidence to support some of the claims against Sperry.

The City of Tacoma has a complaint on file and pictures of black ash that dotted homes and cars throughout the community. But the report doesn't provide a conclusion about the source of the material.

Gary Coy, owner of Sperry Ocean Terminals, said many of the complaints against his company don't make sense. For example, he said there are complaints about the ships running constantly and making noise. But he said the ships are tied to shore power and, thus, don't make that much noise.

"It's just like when you elect to live by the airport. You are going to have things take place that's not like a normal community," Coy said. "As far as being a good neighbor, we have the lowest impact we can have on a community."

But some people, including Elliott, claim that what the residents really want is no business presence at all.

"My opinion is they want to try and get Sperry Ocean (Terminals) moved out of there," he said.

Grandfathering

One term that many of those involved in the debate continue to toss about is "grandfathering." The idea is simple: A business like Sperry Ocean Terminals, and potentially Temco if the zoning changes were extended, would be able to operate as usual because it was pre-existing.

However, when a business or residence is "grandfathered," the property is out of compliance into the future — and that can create issues for financing or selling the business.

"It's kind of like brushing you off. We know you are there, but by doing this we are really — I'm going to use the term — taking you to the gallows," Coy said. "It becomes a cloud on the title."

He said three banks told him the term "grandfathered" is basically a death knell.

"We need to continue to do improvements. We have put millions of dollars into that property," Coy said. "(The local residents) don't understand because they don't see it. It's all in the water and in the dock."

Herrmann agrees that a "grandfather" designation could impact Coy if he wanted to sell the business. However, she doesn't

necessarily agree that he won't be able to get financing for improvements — describing that as another red herring being used to make the issue more divisive.

But Coy said if the city moves forward with the zoning change, it should be willing to compensate him for any eventual loss.

"If you are going to down-zone a business, they should be compensated," he said.

Environment

Citizens for a Healthy Bay says it would have been easy for Sperry Ocean Terminals to have opposed projects like Chinese Reconciliation Park. But the company supported the nearby environmental work.

Now, Citizens for a Healthy Bay is supporting Sperry by opposing the zoning changes.

"Zoning would be switched there to make it consistent with natural habitat areas. (That) kind of sends a message to other businesses that I don't want a natural habitat project next to my property because the same thing will happen," said Bill Anderson, the group's executive director. "We don't want to discourage other businesses from participating in natural habitat restoration."

Heather Trim, director of policy for People for Puget Sound, said her organization only makes recommendations based on scientific and environmental point of views.

"We want the most protected use designation to be made in the appropriate location," Trim said. "The problem we have ... (is) we are destroying the Puget Sound by a thousand cuts — where we take a little there and take a little here." Trim said her organization also takes issue with covered parking and does not want Sperry to receive permission for adding parking over the water.

Deep water

Another concern for those looking at future industrial uses along the Tacoma waterfront is that the area being considered for rezoning has natural deep water.

"We would love to be able to work out something that protects the deep water for future industrial uses, while at the same time creating an open walkway and access," longshoreman leader, Mason said. "Maybe there is a way to do it. But I don't want to give up the deep water use just to get a walkway from Tacoma Dome to Point Defiance."

Coy said that his business could not be moved to another location because it needs deep water.

"It's not just a local asset," Coy said, "it's a state and national asset that need to be protected."

Bayside option

When looking at options for the "missing link," some people have asked whether the Bayside Trails system could fill in the gap.

Opened in 1975, the system included 2.5 miles of trail within a 20-acre greenbelt adjacent to the Stadium District. The system provided a pedestrian link to the waterfront, public access to an urban green space, recreational opportunities and views of the water.

Most of the original trail system is closed to the public because of erosion and stormwater runoff challenges, public safety concerns and the high cost of maintenance.

However, Ferman said Bayside isn't a strong option because most people want the trail to be on the water — and, more importantly, Bayside isn't necessarily the safest or most accessible trail.

"It serves a certain segment of the population," she said. "Me and my newborn baby and my 5-year-old are not going to walk up there alone, but there are some people in the community that would like that wilderness trail."

Jim Lake, who has lived near Stadium Way for about 20 years, is an engineer and builder. He said he wouldn't recommend that the city do a lot of work on the slope the trail covers because that foundation is important to the Stadium District community.

Even if the city did decide to invest a substantial amount of money to clean up the trail, he said there would be problems.

"You still have the fact that any trail you build in there would be steep and have steep grades up and down," Lake said. "It's difficult for a lot of people to navigate."

Process

In 2003, the Department of Ecology issued new guidelines to assist local governments in meeting state requirements to conduct a comprehensive review and amendment of a Master Prog for Shoreline Development.

Cities within Pierce County, including Tacoma, were assigned to have their updated SMPs submitted to DOE by Dec. 1, 2011.

However, Stephen Atkinson, the City of Tacoma staff contact for the program update, said there is still considerable work left to do before the issue will be put to bed.

City Council has two committee meetings scheduled during October that focus on this topic. The committees will report to the full council in November and council members can propose amendments.

Once City Council adopts the SMP, DOE will conduct a review and schedule a public comment period.

"(DOE) can bring their own set of concerns back to the council," Atkinson said. "Then it ultimately has to be approved by (the) council."

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