

Walk plan will lead to future

LARA HERRMANN AND MARKUS DENNIS

Published: April 20th, 2008

For more than 60 years, Tacomans have dreamed of a continuous shoreside walk along Commencement Bay, from the foot of the Foss Waterway to the beach and trails of Point Defiance. Now we can see the dream within our grasp.

This walk on the waterfront, if realized, could help drive millions of dollars into the local economy, improve the health of Puget Sound and complete the dream of a world-class recreation and education resource accessible to and enjoyed by all Tacomans and visitors.

Chicago's Michigan Avenue, including the celebrated Magnificent Mile, runs about seven miles along Lake Michigan. By coincidence, that's also the length of San Antonio's Riverwalk, credited with turning around the economy of that city.

And seven miles is almost exactly the distance from the head of the Foss Waterway to the entrance to Point Defiance Park. Like Michigan Avenue and the Riverwalk, Sydney Harbor or Talin, our Commencement Bay shoreline can be a first-choice destination for visitors and residents alike.

Unlike the creators of Riverwalk or Portland's Riverfront Place, we're not starting from scratch. In fact much of what we need is already in place.

Thanks to Metro Parks and the City of Tacoma, we have picnic areas and volleyball courts, fishing piers and spots for reflection. We have a world-class collection of museums, starting with the history, art and glass museums downtown and continuing north to the Working Waterfront Museum, which opens a new exhibit this summer.

ACCESS IS KEY

Sites like the Chinese Reconciliation Park and the old Tacoma fireboat offer historic insight. Conservation efforts like those of the Foss Waterway Development Authority and Tahoma Salt Marsh near Reconciliation Park contribute to the health of Commencement Bay.

Ruston Way boasts a great selection of restaurants, and we celebrate on the shore at Freedom Fair, Maritime Fest, the Tall Ships Festival and the Holiday Boat Parade.

All of this is framed by the power and beauty of Puget Sound, Commencement Bay and the waters that feed them.

But this seven-mile waterfront is fragmented by zoning that puts industrial uses next to conservation areas. Our waterfront has multiple owners and no single “keeper” or coordinator – not even a business improvement district as exists downtown.

And our seven miles lack accessibility. It’s impossible to travel the full distance next to the water on foot, bike or skates because the route is a collection of dead ends.

Walk the Waterfront, the newly formed organization we represent, is not the first group to dream of an integrated, accessible seven miles.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

As long ago as 1948, city planners envisioned a continuous, human-scale waterfront dotted with parks and gardens. In the late 1970s, with the dedication of the city’s Jack Hyde Park near Old Town, local governments made a bet on the future of the decaying industrial shore. And in 1988, the newly formed City Club focused on the waterfront in its first study, calling for a shoreline route from the Foss to Point Defiance. Civic leaders have long seen the potential for an urban waterfront dedicated to recreation, commerce, conservation, culture and history. We’re well on our way; but there’s more to do.

Why bother? We have three motives: economic benefits, the environment and our quality of life.

Seven miles of world-class waterfront could have immense economic impact for the community. One of the city's development strategies is focused on convention visitors and tourists. A waterfront with several days worth of activities, marketed as an integrated whole, could attract visitors and keep them in town. That means tax revenue and jobs.

(And at the risk of sounding competitive, our waterfront can trump Seattle's, where the Alaskan Way Viaduct and industrial use have virtually eliminated access for pedestrians.)

To multiply the economic benefit, we should use the waterfront as the "anchor" attraction, guiding visitors "landward" so Tacoma's business districts can benefit as well. A map of the San Antonio Riverwalk shows how.

Riverwalk maps identify sites on the river, naturally, but they also highlight routes into San Antonio's downtown attractions. We can do the same, starting with the University of Washington Tacoma and environs, the Stadium District, Old Town and the Proctor District; many neighborhood merchants could benefit from the waterfront. And the pathways themselves can become the sites of new activity. Add the "bookends" of Point Defiance Park and the Dome District (with the LeMay auto museum coming soon), and Tacoma's waterfront could be a remarkable visitor destination.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

It's not all about money, though. We have a legal and moral obligation to restore the health of Puget Sound, and our seven miles can help here, too. Working with groups like Citizens for a Healthy Bay and the Puget Creek Restoration Society, we can use established and emerging technologies to restore salmon habitat at the same time we intensify human use of the shoreline.

We can help clean stormwater flows into the bay. We can encourage use of human-powered craft and cleaner marine fuels. And with UWT's Urban Waters program launching its scientific work on improving the Sound, we have a unique opportunity to demonstrate these principles for the country and the world.

Finally, this is our waterfront. Whether we think of the Puyallup Tribe's historic Shaballup, the Little Canton settlement, the Tacoma sawmills that helped rebuild San Francisco or the docks of the Mosquito Fleet, we and our forebears have lived and worked on this shoreline for a long, long time.

We can create a wonderland for schoolkids, families, runners and boaters. Educators can build curriculum around the scientific, commercial and cultural dimensions of the waterfront. We can celebrate our community year round. We can transform a very good place into the soul of the city.

Most importantly we want to create a communitywide vision for the waterfront. We have nearly 80 percent of what we need already in place.

Walk the Waterfront plans to launch a series of conversations with all the stakeholders on the waterfront: the many governments, private landowners, citizen users and nonprofit groups that make up the owner/user "checkerboard."

FORMING A PLAN

Then in November, we'll invite these stakeholders to create a shared plan to finish the last 20 percent of the waterfront. In this process we'll examine opportunities and obstacles and set priorities. Do we have places that are ill-lit and unsafe or dangerous stretches of road? Can we move faster to fix environmental problems? Can some sites be put to even better use? Can the hum-drum become beautiful?

Ideas and questions are already swirling: Should we have a waterfront amphitheatre? What about human-powered craft? How can we promote educational uses? Do we have enough hotels? How can we increase winter

use? What should we do about salmon habitat and the myriad other environmental issues along the shore?

Part of the plan must address finances. It's one thing to dream big; it's quite another to pay for it. We need to answer questions about the mix of public and private funds and the appropriate roles of federal, state and local governments.

One of the greatest challenges is the complexity of ownership. No one entity can speak for everyone involved. The City of Tacoma and the Town of Ruston, the Foss Waterway Development Authority, Metro Parks, the Port of Tacoma and the Puyallup Tribe of Indians all have stakes in the ground. State and federal governments have regulatory responsibilities. And many businesses for nonprofit entities have investments on the water. We'll need to sort out how to advance a plan with many owners and no central authority.

We don't think it is presumptuous for us to work these issues. Tacoma is at just the start of a long civic renewal, and we believe the entire waterfront should be part of that renewal.

Lara Herrmann, a Tacoma attorney, is president of Walk the Waterfront. Markus Dennis, a board member, is director of the Foothills Trails Coalition. For more information, visit www.walkthewaterfront.org



The Walk the Waterfront group hopes the Ruston Way shoreline along Commencement Bay will become part of a seven-mile walk stretching from Point Defiance to the Thea Foss Waterway.