

## Welcome to Boomerton Puget Sound's forgotten stepchild comes into its own

By: Bryan Corliss

Artist Amy Burnett stuck out the bad times in her native Bremerton, when her gallery was virtually the only downtown business. Now, she sees a funky future in a new urban village. "Bremerton does have the culture," she says. "This is where the struggling artists are." (Photo Courtesy of Neil Rabinowitz)

Scenes from Bremerton's vibrant earlier self: The U.S.S. Pittsburgh, which lost its bow in a typhoon off Okinawa in 1945, comes into dry dock for repairs at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard (left), and a parade down Pacific Avenue in the middle of downtown, sometime in the late 1940s.



Mayor Cary Bozeman gets credit for much of Bremerton's revitalization, which includes turning a Navy Yard scrap pile into the gleaming new Harborside Fountain Park next to the city's ferry landing. "There were a lot of ideas in place before Cary got here, but he's just a doer," says Jerry Reid, a civic leader. (Photo: Neil Rabinowitz)

Former Seahawks kicker Norm Johnson, now a Bremerton real estate agent, stands on the balcony of the new Harborside Condomiums. The units list between \$400,000 and \$1.4 million each - a steal compared to prices in Seattle - but so far, nobody has moved across the Sound to snap them up. (Photo: Neil Rabinowitz)



Bummertown. That's what they called it, back in the '90s. As the rest of Puget Sound - heck, the whole nation - enjoyed explosive prosperity, Bremerton fell deep into urban decay. Its downtown was a boarded-up shell, its empty stores valued only for their parking. Its neighborhoods were crumbling, landlords no longer willing to maintain World War II emergency housing that wasn't supposed to last that long anyway.

Bummertown. For a generation, it's been the forgotten stepchild of Puget Sound, the grimy black hole across from the gleaming Emerald City, a destination on a ferry that nobody takes. It's the Oakland of the Northwest, a Harlem to Belltown's SoHo, a Compton with rain.

Poor. Old. Bummertown.

But today something's happening in the town we all forgot. New condos line the city's waterfront. New partnerships have brought a gleaming government building and downtown marina, turned scrap heaps into parks and parking lots into a convention center. A handful of businesses have moved across the Sound. National magazines are putting Bremerton high on their lists of up-and-coming cities.

Is Bummertown now Boomerton? The signs are all there, says Bellevue developer Ron Sher, who owns two pieces of downtown real estate. "I have a lot of confidence in the future of Bremerton," he says. "What they've done is remarkable."

Mayor Cary Bozeman's office is on the top floor of the new Norm Dicks Government Building, a three-year-old structure on high ground overlooking Bremerton's downtown and the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard.

The building's an example of what Bozeman's trying to do in his adopted city: Bremerton couldn't afford a new city hall, so Bozeman convinced six other government agencies to pool their money with him to build the building - Bremerton's first Class A office structure.

Bozeman gets a lot of the credit for Bremerton's resurgence.

"There were a lot of ideas in place before Cary got here, but he's just a doer," says Jerry Reid, a real estate broker and civic leader in Bremerton since the 1960s.

Bozeman's friendly and high-energy. He says he hires smart people to run his city for him, so he can spend 80 percent of his time promoting it. He keeps a personal mailing list and sends those people envelopes stuffed with photocopies of upbeat stories about his city. Those stories beget other stories.

"It goes to show you don't need a Ph.D. in marketing to get the buzz out," says Andrea Spencer, the city's community development director.

Bozeman's selling a vision: downtown Bremerton reborn as the "Harborside District" - an urban village on the shores of Puget Sound, with high-rise condos and apartments, street-level retail and pedestrianfriendly parks, all tied closely to the ferry terminal, a marina and a boardwalk.

"If we're smart, and we are now," he says, "there's no reason we can't be a vibrant city."

To get there, Bozeman and the city council have done a lot: Working together with other agencies to do projects none could manage on their own; approving tax breaks for developers of multifamily housing; and lifting height limits on buildings. The city's planning staff has preapproved development plans for more than 2,000 houses, apartments and condo units, and pledges 20-day turnarounds on building permits.

"We're teed up in all areas," Spencer says.

Bozeman's got experience with this whole boomtown thing. He spent 16 years, from 1977-1993, on the Bellevue City Council, a key time in Bellevue's transition from bedroom suburb to bustling edge city. He served three stints as Bellevue's mayor but was out of politics by 1995, when he got a consulting job with the Olympic College Foundation in Bremerton. He was charmed by the old Navy city. "I really liked it," he says. "I sold my house and moved."

Yet while he loved the fact that he could buy a waterfront home for under \$200,000, Bozeman says he found some things missing. "When I got here, there was no Starbucks store. I said, 'You've got to be kidding. Are we the only city in Washington without a Starbucks?'"

It wasn't always that way.

Bremerton was once Puget Sound's second city, important enough that presidents campaigned here. There's a plaque along the main downtown drag, Pacific Avenue, showing the spot where Harry Truman gave a rousing speech in June 1948. According to local lore, someone in the crowd shouted, "Give 'em hell, Harry" - thus giving Truman his catchphrase.

Bremerton's glory years came during World War II, when tens of thousands poured in to work at the Navy yard. The population swelled from around 15,000 to maybe 80,000. Housing was so scarce that newcomers slept in rented chicken coops.

They performed industrial miracles. By war's end, five of the battleships sunk at Pearl Harbor had been repaired and returned to the Pacific Fleet by Bremerton workers, who also built five new aircraft carriers.

Yet the seeds of Bremerton's later decay also were sown. To alleviate the housing crunch, the newly formed Bremerton Housing Authority threw up more than 6,000 cheap houses. When the war ended, and the workers went home, Bremerton was left with a housing glut that lasted for decades, Reid says. Landlords couldn't afford repairs on houses they couldn't rent. Neighborhoods slowly fell apart.

Still, downtown Bremerton continued to prosper. It was the Kitsap Peninsula's retail center through the 1970s, home to a J.C. Penney store that covered a full city block, plus a Sears, an iconic Woolworth's - even one of the first Nordstrom Rack outlets.

But there was trouble. Sears and J.C. Penney wanted to move to new sites out on Bremerton's east edge. They were opposed by downtown interests. There were suits and countersuits, and in 1985 the chain retailers did move - out of the city completely, to the new Kitsap Mall in unincorporated Silverdale.

So even as the '90s tech boom brought unprecedented prosperity to most of Puget Sound, things in Bremerton got so bad that large chunks of the city were federally designated as urban blight zones. "We had junk cars and unkempt yards," says Reid. "The downtown area became boarded up."

It's not that leaders didn't try. Reid was part of "Flagship City," the first revitalization effort in the 1980s. "We sat in a room and put ideas up on a wall," he says.

And in the '90s, Bremerton tried to remake itself as an art colony. Nationally known painter Amy Burnett, a Bremerton native, established a gallery and artists' studios in an empty downtown department store just a block from the old Admiral movie theater, which had become a performing arts and community center during the Flagship City days.

But it was hard to get consensus. Many people liked that Bremerton's housing remained cheap, and they didn't want anyone rocking the battleship with higher taxes or outside competition.

"There's a whole contingent of people who say less is better," Reid says. "Not everyone wants change."

That was the situation Bozeman faced when he decided to run for mayor in 2001. "There was a lot of pent-up anger and no one knew where to put the blame," he says. "No one could figure out what should be the next step."

Bozeman's message was "we weren't going to reinvent ourselves as the old Bremerton. We were going to have to be something different."

Just as Bremerton's decline was the result of its World War II boom years, the current revival is built on the fruits of the postwar decline. Empty commercial buildings on several blocks of downtown Bremerton waterfront had been demolished and paved over for parking lots. Why not, Bozeman proposed, build something on them?

First came a \$40 million hotel and conference center just east of the Bremerton ferry terminal, funded in part by city bonds and a hotel-motel tax. The project's a success, Bozeman says - it broke even last year and should start turning a profit.

The city also acquired a small strip of land on the west side of the ferry dock. For years it had been the site of a Navy Yard scrap pile. Now it's the Harborside Fountain Park, featuring trees, public art, waterfront picnic tables, six copper-ringed fountains, and the new Bremerton Naval Museum, housed in one of the shipyard's oldest buildings, which the Navy donated and moved to the site.

"I don't think there's a better little urban pocket park on the West Coast," says Spencer.

The Port of Bremerton and the city are in the midst of a \$22 million project to expand the old 50-slip marina to hold 330 boats. When completed, it will be linked to a 3,000-foot floating boardwalk that will stretch around the Bremerton waterfront.

And work started last July on a \$31 million tunnel that will take ferry traffic under the downtown and off the streets, making them friendlier to the pedestrians Bozeman envisions.

Private investment is starting to follow. The Kitsap Credit Union has opened its new headquarters across the street from the convention center, and Kitsap County developer Tim Ryan is building another Class A office building on Pacific. And in January, a symbol of the old Bremerton - the old city hall - was torn down, making way for an extended-stay hotel.

In all, city leaders claim \$500 million in new investment in Bremerton's downtown core since 2002.

The signature project is the Harborside Condominiums, a \$56 million joint effort of the city and the Bremerton Housing Authority. Two six-story towers rise above the new marina at the water's edge. It's the condos that everyone points to when they talk about the new Bremerton.

Yet the more important effort is likely Sher's plan to redeem the old J.C. Penney property. Sher, who redeveloped Bellevue's Crossroads Mall, plans to build 200 apartments atop the old store, with a grocery store and other retail at street level and an underground parking garage.

His project, many say, should bring the critical mass of residents and retail downtown Bremerton needs to take off.

For his part, Sher, who also owns a downtown Bremerton office building, says the city's rebirth is a mathematical certainty. There are 1.5 million people projected to move to Puget Sound by 2040, and there's not room for all of them on the Seattle side.

"You've got to put another half-million people into Kitsap, and Bremerton's the front door to Kitsap," he says. "It's not a question of if, it's when, and when's on a time schedule that's going to pencil out for me."

Yet there are some dark clouds amid all this silver lining.

While the list of projects is impressive, they're all clustered within a 12-block sector. Outside the Harborside District, there's been far less activity. It was a strategic decision to focus the city's resources there and hope the private sector takes care of the rest, the mayor says. "Without doing that, nothing else is going to happen."

And while the Navy provides some 15,000 good-paying jobs in Bremerton and at bases nearby, there are no other major employers. The list of Kitsap County's top employers includes nursing home operators, call centers and Wal-Mart.

There is one software company in Bremerton - Dimension 4, which does graphics software used widely by the Defense Department. President Kent McManus decided to move the company from Seattle in 2003.

It was the right choice, he says. Office rent in Bremerton is far less, and Dimension 4's been able to recruit the talent it's needed from local schools and the four-year colleges in Tacoma.

"The move has really been very good," McManus says. "It's much more financially advantageous than on the east side of the Sound."

But the fact remains that there's no four-year university to train homegrown, high-skill workers in Kitsap County. "It's a huge economic problem for us," Bozeman says.

That means luring people to come across the Sound, and that can be a hard sell. "When I made the announcement that we were going to move over here, there were a couple of people who were not terribly enthusiastic about it," McManus says.

Sales of the new condos have been slow - largely because of the national real estate downturn, real estate agent Norm Johnson says. But tellingly, all the Harborside buyers so far have come from elsewhere on the Kitsap Peninsula.

"We thought we'd be able to grab some from the downtown Seattle side," says Johnson, a former Seattle Seahawk who's now a Kitsap County resident and member of the Bremerton Rotary.

It's that old Bummertown image, some say. Even with all the recent good news, "Bremerton has a bad rap," says Reid.

Still, if Sher can rent his 200 apartments, and the condo market revives, and the new office buildings fill, it's easy to believe Bremerton really could be the next Washington boomtown.

All the ingredients for good urban life already are here, boosters say: diverse galleries, local restaurants, boutique shops. "Bremerton does have the culture," says Burnett. "It's got the Admiral Theater. It's got the museums. This is where the struggling artists are."

And unlike other suburbs that are building downtowns from scratch, Bremerton is authentic, Spencer says. "We aren't one of those cities where they create Disneyland. We have real bones."

Johnson's sales pitch is compelling: "There's less congestion, a smaller town, no traffic. Your dollars go farther. It's less expensive and you're as close to Seattle as you need to be.

"I don't know the old Bremerton, but I know Bremerton since 2000 and it's changing by leaps and bounds. What's happening here is real. ... I can see it change and I'm excited."

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