

TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

Urban renewal redevelopment along the Willamette targets public access improvements

RIVERFRONT MASTER PLAN CONCEPT BY ROWELL BROKAW



The city of Eugene is aiming to complete construction for a park and other riverfront redevelopment by 2021. The future park is part of the city's Riverfront Urban Renewal District, which includes 16 acres of riverfront property sold by the Eugene Water and Electric Board to the city for \$5.75 million in 2016.

Amanda Nobel Flannery, the economic prosperity programs manager with the city, says, "The riverfront redevelopment is likely to be a key destination for the 2021 IAAF World Track and Field championships."

The master plan for the riverfront property was approved in 2010 after input from more than 1,000 community members, Nobel Flannery says.

In addition to the park, the plan includes "a high quality multi-use riverfront redevelopment that will reflect the community's vision of providing economic and housing opportunities, promoting compact urban development and enhancing natural resources," she says.

The venture would be paid for with urban-renewal funding, otherwise known as tax increment financing, which opponents say diverts property tax revenue for schools and essential city and county services.

Nobel Flannery says the city has just signed an exclusive negotiating agreement with Williams & Dame, a potential developer. It provides for six months due diligence process on their part, she says, and the company is interested in owning and redeveloping the property consistent with the riverfront master plan.

Those concerned about the idea of the city's green-lighting another boxy Capstone or Home2 Suites project with little to no setbacks may note that Williams & Dame developed Portland's Pearl and South Waterfront districts.

Part of the redevelopment plan also encompasses a design to connect Willamette Street to the Willamette River. Will Dowdy, with the city's planning department, says Willamette to Willamette is a "handful of projects that are intended to bring downtown closer to the river."

After reaching out to the public, Dowdy says people consistently talked about the connectivity and the barriers that prevent an easy commute from downtown to the river.

Dowdy says the river is only a half mile from the inter-

section of Eighth Avenue and Willamette Street, but navigating the existing path to the river isn't obvious. "Once you get along the railroad tracks — because right now you have to kind of go around a parking lot area — you go through tall fences with barbed wire at the top," he says.

Public input also identified a few crucial barriers that commuters face when walking or biking to the river. Dowdy says the city is working to improve the intersection of Eighth Avenue and Mill Street, the railroad track crossing and to improve Eighth Avenue.

"One of the things that we are looking at is to see if Eighth Avenue can feel less like a corridor for moving cars quickly into downtown and more like any other part of downtown," he says.

Dowdy adds that the loudest complaint from the public is the unpleasant commute along Eighth. "Some of that has to do with the development or lack of development on the properties along it," he says, which includes the former city hall site and fencing around the empty lot.

Plans are under way to convert Eighth Avenue into a two-way street — when it's due for repaving in the next few years — and to improve bicycle lanes, he says.

When asked about the origin of the barriers to the river, Dowdy says riverfront redevelopment is happening across the country in communities that once used their rivers as the industrial centers of town, and which historically have moved their business and residential centers away from the river.

"But now, as the economy has been changing and evolving over the last two decades, the riverfront location doesn't have the same industrial significance, and so in Eugene — just like many other communities — we're at the point where we are rediscovering our waterfront and look-

ing to strengthen that connection rather than push farther away from it," Dowdy says.

Scott Clarke, an architect with Pivot Architecture in Eugene and chair of AIA-SWO Eugene-Springfield Committee on Local Affairs, answered questions together with fellow CoLA members regarding the implementation of the RURD via email. *Eugene Weekly* asked if both plans for a new City Hall and courthouse should be considered once construction begins on Willamette to Willamette.

"The new locations for City Hall and the new County Courthouse strongly support the Willamette to Willamette plan. As such, their construction will improve the viability of the EWEB riverfront redevelopment," Clarke wrote in an email. "The two civic projects will support riverfront redevelopment provided that they support the objectives of Willamette to Willamette."

And as far as worries of Capstone go, Clarke adds that community and board participation were kept in mind with the development of the EWEB Riverfront Master Plan.

"It is a master plan that identifies values and strategies that will result in a diverse, inclusive, sustainable neighborhood," according to the email. "Capstone, by comparison, was a single-use development beholden mostly to the city's land use code and the market demands of student housing," Clarke writes.

"The city cannot ensure architectural quality," he continues. "It can only establish conditions that will increase the likeliness of establishing appropriate uses, densities, and other conditions that allow the creation of safe, sustainable built environments." ■

The city is looking for volunteers to serve on a "River Guides" advisory committee on the RURD. To apply, call Amanda Nobel Flannery at 541-682-5535 or email Amanda.NobelFlannery@ci.eugene.or.us. Applications are due Sept. 25.

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