

Of Time and the Riverfront

Fourteen years ago I pointed out that it made no sense to have an EWEB maintenance yard squatting on the city's most promising point of connection to its downtown riverfront. I'm talking about the area that extends south from the EWEB Headquarters Bldg. to the old Art Deco Steam Plant.

This was a very unwelcome observation at the time. EWEB had just concluded a yearlong master planning process and had concluded that it would be best to consolidate their operations on this riverfront site for the foreseeable future. Exceptions to their hard-won conclusions proved awkward at best.

Ah, the foreseeable future. I guess it depends on who's doing the foreseeing.

At the time, I was the city's lead planning and urban design consultant for the Ferry St. Bridge Corridor project, examining the transformative potential of the south and north banks of the river that might accompany a replacement of the 1949 bridge.

I foresaw, for example, that a new Ferry St. Bridge could be designed to touch land a little farther north than the present one does along Club Road, allowing a wide green strip of Alton Baker Park and a new south-facing esplanade to extend beneath the bridge landing and create a new north shore.

A rebuilt and realigned viaduct could create a significantly wider and more accessible EWEB site instead of crowding the old Quonset hut Storage Bldg. as it now does. Careful engineering studies at the time proved, much to my personal disappointment, that it wouldn't be feasible to eliminate the viaduct altogether and dive beneath the railroad tracks because of the long distance it takes to ramp down and then to get back up. Plus there was the additional problem in this area of the need for constant tunnel dewatering due to the high water table of a river terrace.

I asked EWEB steam plant managers if they foresaw the phasing out of their hogged fuel pile, the small mountain of leftover forest waste that they fed into their furnaces to produce steam.

Not in the foreseeable future, they responded. But the university was already phasing their pile out, and it seemed clear – at least to some - that there would likely be another transitional site of opportunity on the EWEB riverfront.

Dorothy Anderson, then an EWEB board member, thought the sawdust mountain site might make an excellent Millrace Confluence Park and the Steam Plant a fine museum. We should probably ask our authentic local visionaries to all wear red socks – or some kind of distinguishing mark - so that there's a better way to tell when



one's around.

We voted not to replace the old bridge, but in the process learned valuable planning lessons about the potential reuse of the EWEB site whenever we returned to returning to the river.

Time passed. And it still made no sense to have a maintenance yard as our downtown riverfront connection, not even to EWEB, who began to look for a new location.

Anticipating a move, a city-hired California consultant recommended an ambitious plan for mixed-use riverfront development, which included the extension of 6th and 7th Aves. along the railroad corridor. I pointed out the impact of such a wide barrier, over 200', that this would create

Did it make any sense that in a time when other cities were tearing down their riverfront barriers that we were about to build our own? Did anyone realize that if we ever wanted to get people, cars and perhaps a Millrace under that barrier – two state highway right-of-ways and a 60' railroad ROW - that it would be like traveling under the length of a Portland city block?

I called it the rat-hole to the river. Wisely, the city dropped relocating 7th Ave., a third of the barrier, from the mix.

Next came the potential location of McKenzie-Willamette-Triad Hospital on the EWEB site. It provided an additional dislodging nudge to EWEB and re-raised the critical issue of site access. It would take \$12.5 million to adequately provide for hospital access on the riverfront. Why? Because of the railroad and the addition of 6th Ave. that blocked the connection.

The transportation consultant's solution was to extend Patterson north from Broadway and tunnel under the highway and the tracks. We're quite fortunate the hospital finally jumped site because this wouldn't have worked either. This misplaced underpass was to resurface in the narrow space in front of the Steam Plant where there was no room to climb out of a 20' hole gracefully. I named this scheme, "Return to the river in trenches." Today, a new group is being formed to plan the future of the EWEB site.

With the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, I'll offer the following free advice:

1. Don't underestimate the problem of riverfront access. Access and land use are flip sides of the same coin.
2. Two up and one down. That is, keep the two existing RR crossings, the one at 5th and the one at Hilyard (no matter what UP wants) and add a significant new portal in the middle, east of the new courthouse. Hint: you'll need the city-owned triangle of land east of the courthouse to make this work.
3. **Follow the Millrace back to the river.**