

PortlandTribune

Unlikely allies look to restore riverfront land

Creative plan to buy acreage for habitat wins nods from port, industry and activists, but needs city cash

BY LEE VAN DER VOO

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A request for city money to restore wildlife habitat on the Willamette River is solidifying unlikely ties between the Port of Portland, its industrial neighbors and environmental groups.

Should city funding be obtained to launch the restoration program, the plan has the potential to resolve decades of fighting over riverside businesses' effects on wildlife by allowing industry to restore habitat on city-owned land in exchange for development permits on industrial properties.

Portland taxpayers also may benefit. If the program succeeds, the city soon will begin purchasing land that, if restored, could yield significant financial returns – in that taxpayers would have less future liability for pollution.

That's because a federal process is under way to make polluters accountable for decades of pollution in the Willamette River. The entities that polluted it, which may include the city of Portland, eventually will be on the hook to either pay damages or restore habitat. Those who invest now probably will get the best value for their dollar and also stand the best chance of having their pollution liabilities resolved early.

The funding request comes from Portland city Commissioners Sam Adams and Erik Sten, who are asking for \$1 million from the city's next budget to start shopping for land along the Willamette River.

They want to use the land for restoration projects, paid for by industrial businesses that want to expand operations that could harm habitat and wildlife, primarily birds and endangered fish species. Environmental groups support the plan, which targets key sites and would create perches and bush cover



Portland Harbor's designation as a Superfund site and ongoing development pressures set off squabbling among all the riverfront players, including the city, businesses, the port and environmental groups. Everyone seems to agree, however, on a plan to restore city-owned waterfront parcels in return for development permits.

L.E. BASKOW /
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PHOTO

for birds and pools for young fish to rest in.

The businesses would be given an option to offset the impact of their development on the environment by paying for habitat restoration on city land as they grow. They would get development permits in exchange for either cash payments for restoration or completed projects. The scenario would give them greater freedom – but not total freedom – to add to their riverside enterprises.

If the funding comes through, land on both sides of the Willamette River from the Broadway Bridge to Kelley Point Park would be eyed for purchase. City planners behind the project say 15 to 18 properties have been identified as key, and some sellers already have shown an interest. Planners won't yet say how much acreage they have in mind or how large the program could become.

The first \$1 million would purchase at least one site and launch a pilot project to test the plan's potential.

The idea has support from the Audubon Society of Portland, National Marine Fisheries Service and Port of Portland. Industrial businesses also are on board. Each had a seat on a city task force charged with advising officials on new riverside zoning to balance their interests.

"They all would benefit greatly from having individual sites from some sort of public ownership, managed by a third party, maybe a nonprofit," said Brian Campbell, a principal planner in the Portland Planning Bureau who oversees the work.

City also considered culpable

Looking ahead, there are potential benefits for Portlanders as well.

Because Portland is considered one among dozens, if not hundreds, of entities that may be responsible for decades of pollution in the Willamette River, the city one day may be ordered to do restoration by the federal government.

Portland is a potential polluter because its street runoff drains via pipes to the Willamette River, carrying contaminants with it.

Along with the Port of Portland and numerous industrial businesses, the city faces two future obligations.

The first is to participate in funding a cleanup of the Willamette River as dictated by the federal Environmental Protection Agency under its Superfund program. The second is to pay damages for permanent harm to natural resources or to restore enough habitat to offset the losses.

In the Portland Harbor, a handful of trustees have been tasked with settling the damages on behalf of the federal government through a process called a Natural Resource Damage Assessment. The trustees include the six tribes with interests in the Willamette River, the federal Department of Interior, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

A division of NOAA, the National Marine Fisheries Service, has served as the liaison between Portland's task force and the trustees. The organization already has voiced support for Portland's proposed

restoration plan, which could satisfy the second of the city's two obligations.

Though trustees have said they aren't sure whether the plan, if funded, would count toward the city's potential obligation to restore land, they indicated this week that they intend to settle some damages early. They could give the city credit for any early investments it makes, such as funding the plan to buy land and have it restored by business.

Mary Campbell Baker, a trustee who represents NOAA, said that if Portland is able to establish a system that allows businesses to pay for habitat projects that benefit fish and other wildlife on city land, the system might fall in line with the trustees' goals.

"That sounds really similar to NRDA (Natural Resource Damage Assessment) compensation and the projects we would do to offset environmental damages," Baker said. "We really have a nice partnership with the city. They're really innovative."

Portland's purchasing power and its ability to develop a restoration program give it an edge over private companies, which may lack the financial clout and the personnel to put the ideas in play themselves.

Plan marks a milestone

Portland officials are proceeding cautiously. Staffers working for both Sten and Adams say they're hopeful their efforts will someday count toward required restoration but for now they're aiming lower.

Jim Middaugh, chief of staff for Sten, said the immediate focus is on coalition building between the environmental groups, the port and industry.

"I don't recall another situation where the National Marine Fisheries, Audubon, the port and the city were all in agreement," he said.

Tom Miller, chief of staff for Adams, said the city would like to build a program the trustees can use but "the relationships around the table have been so tenuous over the years we haven't given ourselves the luxury of thinking that far ahead."

Perseverance and a recognized need for change forced the conversation.

Bob Sallinger, conservation director of the Audubon Society of Portland, is among several players encouraged by the consensus that's been built. He believes the group can work to leverage state and federal funds if it can resolve outstanding issues and press ahead.

"There are still very, very difficult issues to work through, specifically what kind of environmental zoning would occur throughout the north reach (of the harbor) and what kind of mitigation would be required when natural resources are removed," Sallinger said.

But he said he's optimistic at least some progress can be made and believes money would help the idea move beyond the hypothetical scenarios and add powerful incentive for work to begin.

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