

PortlandTribune

Competing river visions confound group's effort

Environmentalists and industry struggle to find common ground

BY LEE VAN DER VOO

The Portland Tribune, Aug 7, 2007, Updated Oct 30, 2009

Seven years of visioning led to this. A Monday afternoon on the fourth floor of the city of Portland's planning building, environmentalists and industrialists in a polite but barbed conversation about future zoning on the Willamette River — and no consensus in sight.

After years of generalities about how the city of Portland will apply new zoning to the Portland Harbor — from the Broadway Bridge on the east side and the Fremont Bridge on the west side north to the Columbia River — choosing a plan for how ecology and industry should coexist proves tricky.

At stake?

On one side, salmon and other wildlife. On the other, 40,000 jobs in the city's industrial area.

So how the River Plan Integration Task Group — the name for the folks around the table — will meet its charge of advising city planners on how to balance those interests will be difficult.

Last week the group of environmentalists and industrial advocates met for the first time as a task force, city officials acknowledging the best result might be an honest conversation but one in which the two sides never agree.

The challenge for city planners, when the two city-sponsored talks are done, will be to draft a plan that replaces existing zoning, which is focused on land use, with a new strategy that balances natural resources with industrial development in the Portland Harbor.

Input from the task force will be combined with input from other Portland residents to help planners reach a recommendation.



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Chris Johnson of Advanced American Construction Inc. welds and repairs spuds for use on a crane barge. About 40,000 people have jobs at the Portland Harbor, many of them in industrial occupations.

The River Plan project aims to comply with a handful of state and regional goals to protect sensitive lands and also draws from the city's River Renaissance Vision, which calls for a mix of healthy industry, habitat and neighborhoods along the Willamette River.

The River Plan is likely to establish an off-site mitigation program that allows industry to restore needed habitat for fish and wildlife on public land as its operations expand on private property. It will set guidelines for fish-friendly docks and riverbanks while they serve industrial needs.

Sides remain far apart

Environmentalists also want to see the plan help innovative ideas like green roofs, bioswales and other conservation practices find a place in the industrial harbor.

"We are clearly not doing enough for the environment. There's a reason why we're endangering salmonids, why you can't swim in the Willamette River, why North Portland is a Superfund site," said Bob Sallinger, urban conservation director for the Audubon Society of Portland and a task force member.

Sallinger acknowledges while he and others at the table for last Monday's talks have spent years engaged in this discussion, it's been easier to talk about concepts than to finally get a look at proposals for an actual zoning plan and get to specifics.

As planning officials begin marking on zoning maps the sensitive habitats that overlay existing industrial docks and wharves, the conversation becomes more difficult.

Industry representatives balk at the suggestion of dock removal or relocation. Sallinger repeatedly accuses them of backpedaling on long-established goals to improve fish habitat.

Industrial harbor users — which include the Port of Portland, Schnitzer Steel Industries Inc. and Advanced American Construction Inc. — fear squishy language in the River Plan will lead to regulations beyond zoning requirements.

The groups are protective of land they already own, fear losing industrial land to fish habitat, and as the price tag climbs for cleanup of industrial pollution in the harbor, now part of the federal Superfund program, they also worry about the financial impacts of the River Plan at a time when cleanup costs loom.

"I don't think we should be blind to the fact that this area is going to need some help to continue to develop" once the full cost of cleanup is known, said Susie Lahsene, manager of transportation and land use policy at the Port of Portland.

Critical fish areas lost

Some members question what a new layer of regulation from the city of Portland will add to an already complex matrix of regulations laid out by state and federal agencies. They also accuse the city of having an unspoken environmental agenda while officials pretend to hear industrial concerns.

Yet, in the harbor, critical fish habitat is at stake.

Nancy Munn is an aquatic ecologist in the habitat conservation division of the National Marine

Fisheries Service and a member of the task force.

Munn said there are five salmon runs through the Willamette River, including two runs of chinook, one coho run and two steelhead.

There also are cutthroat and bull trout, several species of lamprey and sturgeon in the river.

“What’s missing is that shallow, backwater area,” where juvenile fish are reared and grow before migrating to sea, Munn said.

Instead, Munn said, those shallow areas have been carved away by industrial development as the river has straightened and grown deeper over the years to accommodate commerce.

In early visioning for the River Plan, the city made a goal to restore salmon runs in the Lower Willamette River, Munn said. In this talk about potential zoning plans, environmental groups are poised to see that goal through.

In the industrial harbor, however, the difficulty in making room for habitat is plain. Much of the land already is developed, 60 percent of it occupied by river-dependent businesses.

The area represents some of the best-paying jobs for the two-thirds of the region’s workforce that doesn’t have a college degree, said Steve Kountz, an economist with the city of Portland.

40,000 jobs maintained

Ann Gardner, development project manager at Schnitzer Steel, describes the river differently from those who focus on environmental concerns. She describes it as a powerful force equipped to move trade and money through Portland, where more than just industry and ecology intersect.

Also in the harbor are a petrol pipeline, railroad, freeways and a skilled labor force dating back to Portland’s days as a shipbuilding community, she said.

“There’s 40,000 jobs down there, but that’s only one part of the story. This is our connection to the outside world,” Gardner said.

“As we invest here, we’re doing it responsibly ... but we want to know, what does success look like? How do you define it?”

Faced with five prospective plans, one calling for no change in zoning, most involved in the talks are gravitating toward combining two of the proposed plans, both geared toward the off-site mitigation plan that will set aside public land for habitat improvements paid for by developing industries.

Industrial users say the concepts protect their use of their land, while environmental groups like that the set-aside zones call for ongoing maintenance at areas designed to protect fish. Both sides are expressing concerns about aspects of the proposals.

The task force is expected to narrow specifics of the plans in a meeting next month.

The City Council plans to adopt the River Plan for the Portland Harbor area by next summer.

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