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The Landscape: Activating the Waterfront

Jeremy Young
Portland State University

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Activating the Waterfront

by Jeremy Young

Forty years ago, Portland caught the nation's attention when it began removing the Harbor Drive expressway (99W) from the west bank of the Willamette River to transform an aging industrial waterfront area into a grand, new open space for the region in the heart of the central city. The resulting open space, known as Governor Tom McCall Waterfront Park, continues to be held up as a national model for the conversion of highways into parks and remains a beloved public space and signature part of the regional landscape today.

Despite this success story, Portland seems to have fallen behind in terms of planning and building a truly successful urban waterfront. Accordingly, a group of Urban and Regional Planning graduate students at the Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning took on the park's improvement to fulfill their Planning Workshop capstone requirement. They partnered with the City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability to study the waterfront and make recommendations for its improvement over the next twenty years as part of the Bureau's Central City 2035 and The River Plan/Central Reach planning processes.

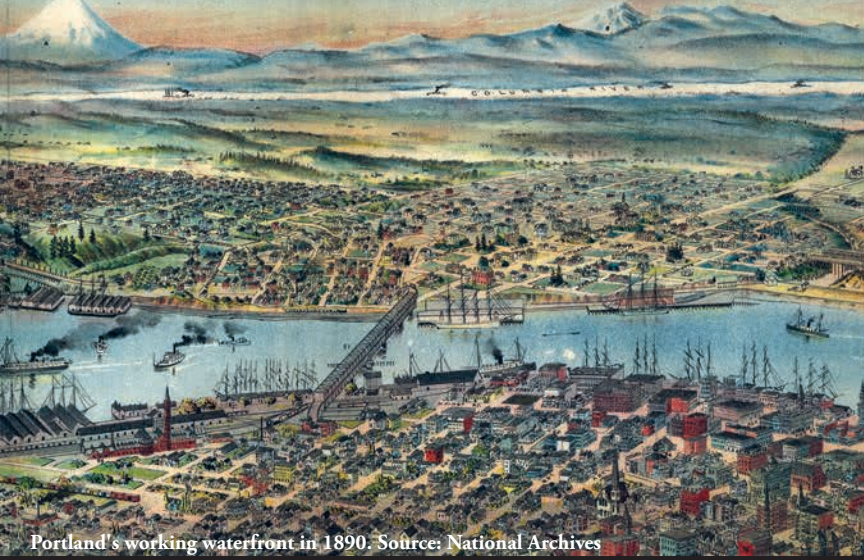
Analyzing planning documents dating back to the 1972 Downtown Portland Plan and the 1975 Downtown Waterfront Park Final Report, they found that with the exception of a few piecemeal improvements over the years such as the Salmon Street Springs, Bill Naito Legacy Fountain, and Japanese-American Historical Plaza, scores of goals and recommendations for the waterfront have never been implemented. Many of these recommendations have appeared in nearly every waterfront-focused plan since 1972, and include expanding the

downtown retail core to the park's edge; eliminating traffic barriers between the park and the downtown (e.g., Naito Parkway); developing small-scale commercial uses in Waterfront Park; improving pedestrian and bicycle circulation within and along the park; enhancing fish and wildlife habitat in and around the Willamette River; and providing better access to the water for park visitors.

Currently, the downtown waterfront tends to be a very active place during the summer months and during special events such as the Rose Festival and the Portland Saturday Market. However, it does not function like a regular destination year-round, and is no longer a vital part of Portland's downtown core as the original working waterfront was.

To address these issues, the students created the "Activate the Waterfront!" a community engagement campaign, to get feedback from the public about what they thought could help to make the downtown waterfront a more vibrant and multipurpose place year-round, and to link the waterfront once again to the life of the central city. Much like the earlier, uncompleted proposals, the top responses reflected a desire for improved access to the Willamette River, boat/kayak rentals, and regular food options in the park, including food kiosks or cafes. Hopefully, the city will give weight to these recommendations as it moves forward with its improvement projects.

Based on this public input, the final report from the workshop project, the Downtown Portland Waterfront Activation Strategy, contains recommendations for creating a successful 21st century waterfront for the Portland region, and may be viewed online at: activatethewaterfront.com. **M**

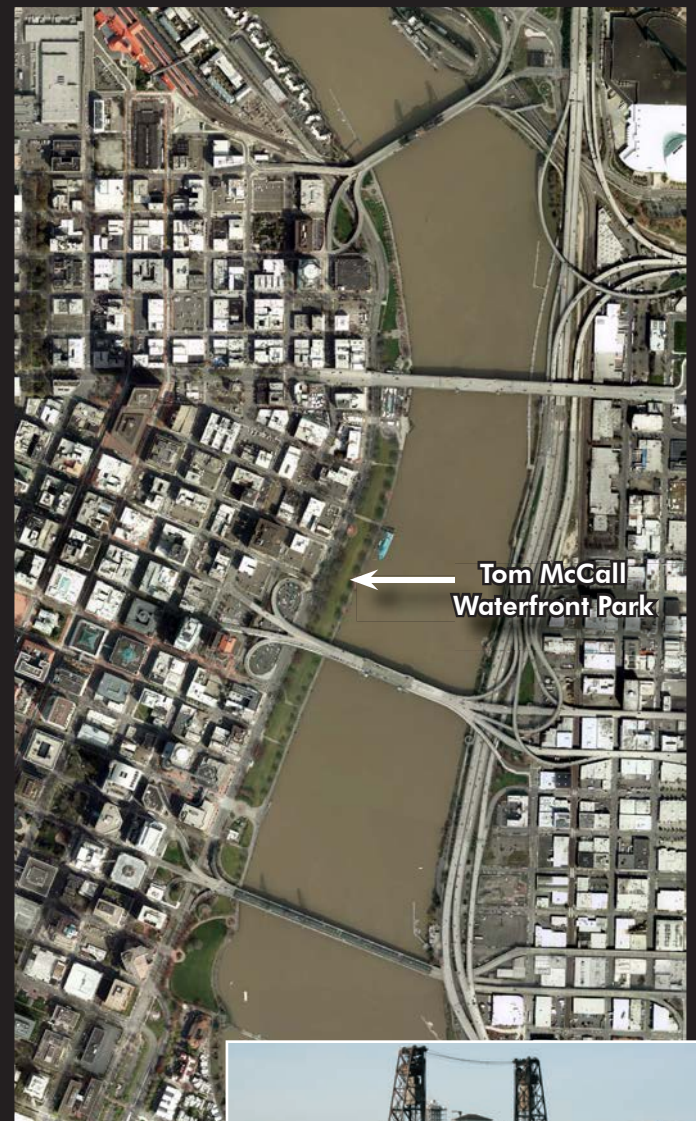


Portland's working waterfront in 1890. Source: National Archives



Portland's industrial waterfront in 1945. Source: Stanley Parr Archives

Portland's waterfront today. Source: RLIS



The industrial waterfront. Source: Downtown Waterfront Final Report, 1975.



Tom McCall Waterfront Park in spring, 2014.