

10-3-1924

## City Club of Portland Bulletin vol. 05, no. 01 (1924-10-3)

City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.)

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### Recommended Citation

City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.), "City Club of Portland Bulletin vol. 05, no. 01 (1924-10-3)" (1924). *City Club of Portland*. 54.

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"Harmony in  
Diversity"

# PORTLAND CITY CLUB BULLETIN

"Active  
Citizenship"

VOLUME V

PORTLAND, OREGON, OCTOBER 3, 1924

NUMBER 1

*FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1924*

*Hotel Benson, 12:10*

## *What Is Your Local Government Doing?*

A CITY CLUB SERIES  
BY CITY CLUB MEMBERS

SIXTH IN SERIES

**SIGEL GRUTZE**

*Chief Deputy Auditor and  
Clerk of Council, City of Portland*

SUBJECT

### **"Financing the Growing City"**

*GROUP SINGING*

- October 10—* BARCLAY ACHESON, Associate General Secretary, Near East Relief.  
"THE NEAR EAST."
- October 17—* CHAPLAIN WILLIAM S. GILBERT.  
"A CITY'S REGENERATION."
- October 24—* NORMAN F. COLEMAN.  
"HOW THE JAPANESE FEEL TOWARD AMERICA."

## **ROSS ISLAND PARK REPORT IS PRESENTED**

The Ross Island Park Committee of the City Planning section, after having completed an exhaustive study of the many questions involved in the Ross Island Park Project, has prepared a report of unusual interest. The report, which follows, was approved by the Board of Governors and will be presented to the Club for adoption at the next regular meeting, Friday, October 3rd:

*To the Board of Governors:*

The following report is submitted, in connection with the proposed action of a private syndicate to take over Ross Island and commercialize it as a park or auto camp, as to whether it would be practicable and desirable

for the city to develop Ross Island as a public park instead of allowing private interests to exploit it.

#### *Location and Description*

Ross Island is located in the Willamette River, within the city limits of Portland, extending from a point somewhat south of Division St. about to the northern end of The Oaks. It consists in fact of two large islands and some small sandbars, lying parallel to each other with the main channel of the river to the west of all of them and a secondary channel to the east of them. At ordinary high stages of the river there is a third channel between the two large islands.

Continued on page 2

# PORTLAND CITY CLUB BULLETIN

Published Weekly By

## THE CITY CLUB OF PORTLAND

Office of the Club . . . . . 607 Oregon Building  
Telephone Broadway 8079

Subscription Price . . . . . \$1.00 per year

Entered as Second Class Matter, October 29, 1920, at the  
postoffice at Portland, Oregon, under act of March 3, 1879

City Club dues are \$1.00 per month, payable semi-  
annually on May 1st, and November 1st. There is no  
initiation fee.

### CITY CLUB PURPOSE

*"To inform its members and the community in  
public matters and to arouse them to a realization  
of the obligations of citizenship."*

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### APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

The following application has been received for membership in the City Club and will be presented for the approval of the Club, Friday, October 31st:

ARTHUR M. CHURCHILL,  
Lawyer,  
1415 N. W. Bank Building.

Proposed by C. C. Ludwig.

## ROSS ISLAND REPORT

Continued from page 1

The so-called Ross Island bridge, as planned at present, will be somewhat north of the island, while the Sellwood bridge will be considerably south of it. The east bank of the river opposite it is bordered by a high bluff with the Portland Electric Power Company's interurban tracks at the foot of it. On the west side the Southern Pacific west side line tracks parallel the shore.

The larger of the two main islands, or Ross Island proper, contains about 137 acres, of which only a small portion (probably 10 acres) is above ordinary high water. The smaller island contains 71 acres, all of which is below ordinary high water. Thus for about three months of the year, usually May, June and July, the greater portion of both islands is covered. There is also danger of submersion and erosion from Willamette River floods which occur in the winter, due to excessive rainfall, and are accompanied by a heavy current.

Both islands are largely covered by heavy timber, mostly cottonwood and oak, with some willow and ash. Except for some cleared land on the larger island both are densely covered with underbrush. The entire tract, including the area between high and low water mark, is said to contain four hundred acres and is assessed at \$93,200. This submerged area consists of sand and gravel having a commercial value, which is excavated and sold for construction work. The title to it has, however, been questioned by the state, which has brought suit to compel the dredging companies to pay royalties to it for the gravel excavated. This suit has recently been decided in the trial court unfavorably to the state's contention, and is now pending before the Supreme Court of the state. It has been understood that the owners claimed all the area within the harbor lines, but the part of this below low water mark is undoubtedly public property, subject to a revocable right in the owners to wharf out to deep water.

No use is at present made of the islands, except as a moorage for log rafts and houseboats, but it is understood that a private syndicate has a contract for the purchase of the property, with a view to developing it as an auto and amusement park. No actual work has been done as yet and the syndicate members have stated that their plans would not become definite for a month or so.

*Practicability of Acquisition*

It may be said in the first place that the city unquestionably has power to acquire the property for park purposes, either by purchase or condemnation. It has been suggested that the purchase might be financed by the issue of so-called public utility certificates, which are not a general obligation of the city and do not require the approval of the voters for their issue, but it is believed that this would not be possible, inasmuch as these certificates are payable only from the income of the property itself and the income that might be derived from the sale of gravel rights and moorage privileges would not be sufficient to make them an attractive investment. The conclusion is therefore inevitable that the purchase could be financed only by an issue of general city bonds, which would have to be voted on by the people. This is by no means an insuperable obstacle, if the purchase should seem desirable, as the voters have always been ready to support park projects.

*Desirability of Acquisition*

The outstanding advantages of Ross Island as a park are its central location and its water frontage. Such other large tracts as exist along the river within the city limits appear to be destined for industrial development within the near future, and even away from the river there is perhaps no other large tract, not so destined, which has anything like a central location. Portland is at present entirely without a park having facilities for aquatic sports and has also a distinct shortage of facilities for field sports, for which Ross Island, if reclaimed, might provide ample room.

There are no serious engineering problems in connection with such a development. It would be necessary, however, to make it accessible to the mainland and to protect it from overflow. Both channels around the island are navigable and bridges would have to be either of the high clearance fixed type or with draw openings. Ferries could be used on the west side, but would have to cross the railroad at grade. On the east side an inclined roadway would be constructed to get down from the bluff and over the railroad, and the navigable channel, which is narrow, could be crossed by a span high enough to permit river boats to pass under it. There has been a suggestion that a ramp might be built to the island from the projected "Ross Island bridge," but it is believed that this would be undesirable, not only because this bridge, as planned, would be some distance from the island but because such a

ramp would create a point of congestion that would interfere seriously with cross-river traffic.

*High Water Presents Difficulty*

According to the records of the U. S. Engineers the Willamette River is above a tenfoot stage for about three months in the year, usually May, June and July, and there is also danger from Willamette River floods in the winter, which, unlike the summer freshets caused by backwater from the Columbia, are accompanied by a relatively high current and are consequently destructive. In 1890 such a flood reached a height of 28.7 feet above low water and in 1923 the winter flood rose to 25.3 feet, with considerable current at the bridges. It would for this reason be necessary either to fill in to a height of not less than 25.5 feet above low water, which would place it above all but five Columbia River freshets and all but one (1890) Willamette River freshet, or else to protect it by dikes and pumping apparatus against all known river heights.

While it would be within the possibilities to fill in the islands to the height as stated it is believed that it would not be reasonably practicable. For one thing it is probable that no deep water channel will ever be opened this far up the river, and even if it should be the material taken from the channel would be sufficient to fill in only a small part of the area to be raised. Furthermore, the river bottom near Ross Island consists of gravel instead of sand and as gravel is difficult to pump through a pipe line this would cause very expensive filling, even if sufficient material could be obtained.

It would seem, therefore, that it would probably be necessary to dike each of the two large islands. Because of the gravel formation heavy seepage would be likely during high water periods, necessitating much pumping, and the dikes would have the disadvantage of cutting off the view of the river from the interior of the park. The finest trees on the islands are located close to the river bank, and diking would involve some destruction of these, since the roots of trees in a dike cause leakage. No exact information has been procurable as to whether filling about the roots of the trees would kill them, though it has been said that the cottonwoods which form the bulk of the timber would probably survive this.

It thus appears that while it would be perfectly practicable to make Ross Island accessible to the mainland and protect it from high water the necessity of doing these things would make the project far more expensive than the

development of mainland parks situated above high water. The question is whether it has advantages which offset these disadvantages.

#### *Advantages and Disadvantages*

The principal advantage of Ross Island has been thought to be its river frontage, as providing facilities for bathing and boating. Recently, however, the question of the pollution of the waters of the Willamette River has come up in connection with the renewal of the permit for a swimming resort at the lower end of Ross Island. This permit has been refused by the city on account of the pollution of the water from the sewers which empty into the river at and above the island. The officials of the U. S. Public Health Service and State Board of Health have in this connection taken during the past two weeks and analyzed samples of water from the Willamette all the way from the lower end of Ross Island to the foot of Elk Ro k Island, just above Milwaukie, all of which showed very heavy pollution and indicated that the river up to the latter point is unfit for bathing. Furthermore, because of this condition and because of the extreme prevalence of crude oil on the water in recent years, this part of the river is far less desirable for boating than formerly. These conditions practically nullify the above-mentioned principal advantage of Ross Island as a park site, for the pollution of the water can be prevented only by the construction of intercepting sewers, and these, while to be hoped for eventually, are not likely to be built for many years.

To sum up, the advantages of the project are as follows:

- (a) Central location for a park,
- (b) The only large tract of undeveloped land available for park purposes within the city limits,
- (c) Small first cost, as compared with what the cost of the same property might be after improvements were made by private interests.

#### Disadvantages:

- (a) Inaccessibility; no approaches except by water,
- (b) Cost of development because of necessity of protection from high water,
- (c) Pollution of water from city sewers, which appears to be serious but which applies to the whole Willamette River below Milwaukie,
- (d) Difficulty of financing; a large bond issue would be necessary both for purchase and for development.

#### *Conclusion*

Your sub-committee is of the opinion that because of water pollution Ross Island is not suitable for a park for aquatic sports. It is believed on the other hand that it may eventually be desirable to acquire it as a general purpose park, that it is entirely suitable for such a park, and that when this should be done depends on when the property can be most economically acquired. It would seem to be unlikely, because of its location and characteristics, that it will ever be developed by private interests in such a way as to make park development by the city much more difficult, as it is unfit for industrial or residential purposes. The cost of purchasing and developing the tract at present would necessitate a large bond issue, and unless the property should be utilized by private interests in a definitely undesirable way—and there is no reason to believe it will be—it would be poor policy for the city to acquire title to it, thus taking it off the tax rolls as well as paying interest on the price, until ready to develop it. When the location and height of the new south Portland bridge have been finally determined on it will be possible to estimate with a nearer approach to accuracy than at present the cost of making the island accessible.

It is believed, then, that for the present the purchase of Ross Island by the city for park purposes is not necessary and as a matter of expediency probably not desirable.

It is suggested, if this is not outside the boundaries of the question submitted, that a more desirable location for a large park suited to aquatic and field sports would be in the lowlands along the Columbia River opposite the Peninsula. This area, which is already reclaimed, offers abundant room for almost any park development. Facilities for swimming and aquatic sports could be developed without any difficulty as to water pollution, either in interior lakes or in sheltered parts of the Columbia River. While the location would be less central than that of Ross Island it would be much easier and less expensive to render such a park accessible.

Respectfully submitted,

Arthur D. Platt, *Chairman*  
Fred C. Schubert,  
Henry M. Grant.  
*Sub-committee.*

Wm. G. Holford, *Chairman*,  
City Planning Section.