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*"Hello There" From Portland*



# A Riverfront Park Runs Through It

*A bend in the river for citizen involvement in Portland — 40 years later*

by Tim DuRoche

On the morning of August 18, 1969, while Jimi Hendrix was striking a climactic chord in front of 35,000 at Woodstock with his cathartic Star-Spangled Banner, 2,865 miles away in Portland a revolution of a slightly quieter, more localized variety was on the rise.

Doug Baker was a popular, widely-read daily *Oregon Journal* columnist who loved Portland. The Rose City's equivalent of San Francisco's Herb Caen at the time, Baker once created a stir by standing at a busy Portland intersection and handing out dollar bills. He was a writer who knew how to bend the ear of his readers when he reported in the August 18 edition of the paper: "Riverfront for People, a group of guys and gals who share the commendable idea that the west bank of the Willamette River should not be allowed to become, like the east bank, one of the Oregon State Highway Commission's concrete mystic mazes, will hold a no-host picnic at noon Tuesday just north of the old Journal Building. 'We want everybody to come,' says Mrs. Robert H. (Allison) Belcher, one of the organizers. 'Old people, young people, children, fat people and lean people. We'll provide the balloons, but people will have to bring their own picnic lunches.'"

The next day on August 19, Riverfront for People (RFP), the ad hoc organization founded a month earlier by Bob and Allison Belcher and Jim Howell around the Belcher's dining-room table, played host to a "consciousness-raising" picnic with 250 adults and smattering of 100-some children. The event, a protest of a proposed possible multi-lane widening of Harbor Drive, took place on "a barren strip between four lanes of busy traffic on Front Avenue and an even busier four lanes on Harbor Drive," as PSU professor of Urban Studies and Planning, Carl Abbott, wrote in his *Greater Portland: Urban Life and Landscapes in the Pacific Northwest*. "The people came in all sizes, shapes, ages and shades of conservatism, but they agreed that they want more emphasis on beauty and less emphasis on automobiles," the next day's newspaper read.

What followed in the coming months on the tails of this demonstration—more picnics, newspaper editorials, a showdown with monumental figures like Portland Development Commission firebrand Ira Keller and Glenn Jackson of the State Highway Department, City Council hearings packed to the rafters and the eventual tearing up of Harbor Drive in favor of what would become Tom McCall Park—was the beginning of a new era of participation and civic will in the life of the Portland region.

## **Beginnings of a New Civic Will**

For many people who are either too young to remember or are recent transplants, it's hard to fathom a Portland region that isn't shaped by forward thinking measures like the Bottle Bill, visionary land-use planning, smart transportation policy and the kind of strong civic agency that led to the defeat of the Mt. Hood Freeway or the creation of Pioneer Courthouse Square. In fact, we mythologize these progressive values at times to the point that we easily convince ourselves that, indeed, this is the way things have always been. But the city in the post-war era was like many mid-sized metropolitan centers, mutedly conservative in tone, content with cautious, paternalistic governance and a prudent use of public dollars. In essence, no news was for the most part good news. Urban renewal was good for business, cars ruled the city, and most folks were none the wiser for change.

The story of Portland up to the late 1960s—early '70s gives a different picture. In his book *Portland: Planning, Politics and Growth in a Twentieth Century City*, Carl Abbott notes, "The process of neighborhood planning between 1957 and 1967 was as straightforward as its content. City Planning Commission reports make no reference to neighborhood groups or citizen involvement. They were prepared by city employees for their colleagues in city hall."

RFP's Allison Belcher recalls the revelatory feeling of appearing before City Council for subsequent hearings on the Harbor Drive issue: "It was

something new for Portland to go down to City Hall and testify—everything had always been run by these people who'd been in power for a long time and they didn't discuss it with anyone. There really hadn't been much change or access up to that point."

In the late 1960s, Bob and Allison Belcher and Jim Howell lived in Northeast Portland and were active in neighborhood and civic renewal efforts. Bob Belcher was an architect with Boora Architects, where he would work for 26 years. President of the Portland chapter of the American Institute for Architects in the mid-'80s, Bob Belcher was also active with the Architectural Foundation of Oregon, one of the handful of men who in the early '70s protested (alongside his wife and future leaders Vera Katz and Gretchen Kafoury) the City Club of Portland's exclusion of women as members. Belcher was in many ways the quintessential "public interest architect," long before that term became a buzz-word. His wife Allison, in addition

to working at home raising their children, had been active in Eugene McCarthy's '68 campaign for President. Prior to earning a nursing degree in the 1980s, Allison was vibrantly active as a citizen representative on the Portland Development Commission and was the first female chairperson of the Multnomah County Democrats in the 1970s. Jim Howell, an architect/transportation planner, was involved in early grass-roots organizing in the Woodlawn and Irvington neighborhoods as an off-shoot of the Model Cities program. Howell later co-designed Woodlawn Park with architect Robert Perron and worked for TriMet, designing the first timed-transfer system for buses, and owned a small bus company. He remains an active voice on transportation issues. All three savored their first successful tastes of citizen empowerment during late summer and fall of 1969.

Neighborhoods throughout Portland had begun to organize in the latter '60s (partly due to increasing frustration from citizens over urban



**TUESDAY'S SHOWERS** failed to stop these picnickers who had lunch on public green north of old Journal Building to promote support for recreational development of riverfront. Estimated 150 persons

turned out for Riverfront for People Committee's picnic. Committee is concerned with redeveloping of west bank area between Burnside and Hawthorne bridges.

Photograph from *The Oregonian*, August 20, 1969, courtesy Allison and Bob Belcher

renewal practices, partly due to federal mandates tied to funding Model Cities and other renewal efforts). “Portlanders,” writes Carl Abbott, “now tend to remember the group with which they were directly involved as the first to storm the barricades of the city hall establishment. . . . Portland planning went through startling changes between 1966 and 1972, as the emergence of active and often angry neighborhood organizations made local residents the actors rather than the objects in neighborhood decisions . . . . In turn, the political context for the new neighborhood planning was the change of generations on the Portland City Council in 1969-1970. Lloyd Anderson, Connie McCready, and Neil Goldschmidt were less committed to old policies and personnel than William Bowes, Stanley Earl, and Buck Grayson [their City Council predecessors].” Indeed, in reflection, Abbott notes while Riverfront for People didn’t begin the movement, it was a “significant moment of people-powered energy that shifted the terms of the debate” regarding political process.

RFP’s Bob Belcher agreed, “What began with Model Cities and then Neil Goldschmidt coming on to Council. . . . was part of this something wonderful that was happening in Portland of that time. It was post-Kennedy—there was a huge energy in the air . . . there was a lot going on, all that turmoil in Vietnam, but there was an underlying current of all these things on a national level. . . . Our great virtue was the times energized us—it was a hopeful time. We were pretty outraged and we were young enough that we thought we could make a big noise about this.”

#### **Taking Back the River**

“I was ironing clothes,” Riverfront for People’s Allison Belcher begins, “as was the wont of females to do of that time and I heard on the radio that the Highway Commission was going to put this road right down through where the Oregon Journal property was along the river, so I called up Ira Keller [chairman of the Portland Development Commission—one of the city’s most powerful, mercurial figures] on the telephone and I said, ‘what are you doing, why are you doing this?’ He said, ‘You shouldn’t be bothered—you’re just a housewife.’”

Jim Howell (the other third of RFP’s initial triumvirate) recalls, “The City Club had just come out with this report [Interim Report on Journal Building Site Use and Riverfront Development] on Harbor Drive, Bob and I were discussing the report, and Allison comes over and says to us,

‘You big-shot architects, all you do is talk—why don’t you do something. That’s when we came up with Riverfront for People.’”

The City Club of Portland’s report, which came out in early August 1969, had concluded: “With sensitive and imaginative planning, the riverfront can become an accessible and inviting front porch for the City, adding to the pleasure and excitement of City living and extending its lively activity to the river’s edge. . . . If, on the other hand, the waterfront becomes an inaccessible, though beautiful, parkway through inattention to imaginative design objectives or overemphasis on economy of traffic movement and disregard of other values, it will be little used and will contribute nothing to the central city’s vitality.”

This echoed Governor Tom McCall’s wish to create an inviting greenway along the Willamette, public park space that would capitalize on the natural assets of the river.

The fear of City Club’s report committee (and the Riverfront for People organizers) was that despite the Governor’s forward-thinking proposal and their recommendations that the Intergovernmental Task Force led by Glenn Jackson (of the State Highway Commission) would ignore urgent pleas and instead “bar our citizens from what should and must be one of the most attractive, livable and useful sections of the core city.”

Among the many young activists who got involved with the Riverfront fight was Gretchen Kafoury, fresh from a stint in the Peace Corp in Iran (“no one had heard of Iran then”). Like many hopeful young Portlanders hungry for change, Kafoury (whose distinguished service includes time as a State Representative, Multnomah County Commissioner, and two terms on Portland City Council) had developed a taste for organizing while working on Robert F. Kennedy’s Presidential campaign. While she did take part in the first Riverfront for People picnic in August 1969, Kafoury noted that the Harbor Drive fight was, “part of a huge mosaic of activism . . . including cofounding Oregon NOW, the Oregon Women’s Political Caucus. . . . there was so much individual power at that time—we were just so aware of how much difference a small group could make. . . . It wasn’t just Neil [Goldschmidt], we had Tom Walsh, another bright young person who lost to Frank Ivancie, our nemesis . . . Seeing how much change was possible inspired many of us—Les AuCoin, Earl [Blumenauer], Vera Katz.”

### Harbor Drive and Declining Downtown

To put things in context, it's worth pointing out that during the 1960s, downtown Portland was in decline, like the downtowns of many American cities. While high-rise office buildings proliferated, retail business was siphoned off by mall developments like Lloyd Center and other projects in Washington and Clackamas counties. Additionally, housing stock had diminished by half with the demolition of neighborhoods for urban renewal projects and the I-405 Stadium Freeway.

Harbor Drive was completed in 1942—a four-lane freeway along the west bank of the Willamette, severing pedestrian access from downtown to the river. A transportation study conducted in 1960 had proposed building 50-some freeway projects by 1990—a plan that would have severely fragmented the metropolitan region. By 1964, the first project, I-5, along the east bank of the Willamette, made it so off-access to both the west and east bank of the river was cut off. In 1968, the State Highway Department proposed widening Harbor Drive, and the city of Portland acquired the former Oregon Journal Building (the one-time Portland Public Market) along Front Street to provide more land for the right of way.

Riverfront for People, while seminal to Portland's rising tide of citizen involvement, wasn't an isolated phenomenon. During this period across the country, metropolitan areas were seeing battle-lines drawn around the so-called "freeway revolts"—a wave of grass-roots opposition to planned freeway construction that resulted in many cancelled projects.

Beginning with San Francisco's 1959 decision to seven of the city's 10 planned freeways, freeway revolts popped up across the country. While most of the efforts focused on defeating planned freeway development, Portland's Harbor Drive was the first revolt that saw the destruction of an already-existing freeway. Maryland State Senator Barbara Mikulski entered her political career as an anti-freeway activist organizing communities and halting freeway development—preserving the integrity of Baltimore's Fells Point and Inner Harbor neighborhoods.

Similar victories occurred in Pittsburgh, Boston, Cincinnati, and notably in Milwaukee, where the city in addition to more recently removing the freeway was able to restore the traditional street-grid and redevelop 26 acres of land employing a New Urbanist zoning code. In the cases of both Portland and Baltimore, what was gained were major cultural amenities in the form of waterfront

access and iconic tourist landmarks. For both cities this investment was key to the renewal of their respective downtown core.

### Setting the Table

Around the time of the Harbor Drive battle, Belcher recalls that there were individuals who were pretty antagonistic to change, like City Councilman Frank Ivancie, who had deep ties to the old guard of Portland. "He was a pretty rigid man, with a lot of influence with City Council and business interests (allied with Glenn Jackson, probably the most powerful civilian in the state then, and PDC's Ira Keller, Portland's answer to Robert Moses) —he was especially influential around this idea of widening Harbor Drive. . . Neil Goldschmidt, who'd been part of the City Club report, approached me and said, 'I hear you're working hard to prevent this new road along the river, I'd love to help you in any way I can.'"

Much of the organizing of critical mass fell to Allison Belcher—"she was the live wire in the group," says Howell. She recalled that, "it was partly through the [1970] election that was coming up for City Council that put us into contact with people—people we knew, neighbors like Gretchen Kafoury, people who baby-sat our children, church lists—that we began calling to get people to come down for this picnic ... then what happened, Bob and Jim started talking to architects like Alfred Staehli and Louis Crutcher interested in preservation of the bridge ramps and the cast-iron buildings, the Beautification Society, the garden societies, and began bringing in all these other people who would later come to talk at the hearings at City Hall."

Pictures of the August picnic, unlike similar bins, or anti-war demonstrations of the time, didn't show long-haired protestors, counter-culture insurgents, but rather young families with children (roped together less they stray off into surrounding traffic), up-and-coming architects and community members—and that caught the eye of everyday Oregonians and the media. As Carl Abbott told me, "the picnic was a great photo op." Bob Belcher said, "It was a different kind of demonstration—it wasn't another antiwar protest, it was a strong showing of citizenry. We wanted our kids to get to the river and not turn their backs on it."

"The whole point was to get the river back," Jim Howell quipped. "It wasn't political, it was civic." Bob Belcher concurs, "We were pretty outraged and we were young enough that we thought we could make a big noise about this."

While RFP encountered a strong opposition





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Tom McCall Waterfront Park, Portland.

from many long-time leaders, there many in the business community who were in favor of stepping back from the roadway expansion and looking at something new. Bob Belcher recalls, “I’ll never forget Glenn Jackson’s reaction in hearing Bill DeWeese, the vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce, say, ‘We think this is a plan well-worth considering, Mr. Chairman’ —and this is after hearing 52 different organizations testifying that day—at the end of it, Jackson said, ‘I think I get the picture, it’s time to go back to the drawing board.’ That was the turning point, that big public hearing.”

Thinking back on the eventual victory over the Harbor Drive expansion, Bob and Allison both noted the huge excitement that grew after the public hearings and how much it energized people to encounter visible citizen-driven change.

Recalling that tipping point, Bob Belcher said,

“We thought it could happen, we didn’t know our chances, I don’t think we were scared. We were both pissed and excited about what could happen. It was astounding that it came to such a point that rapidly.”

Jim Howell, in accessing the events, reflects, “This whole process surely triggered a lot of what came later. We couldn’t have had nearly the support we had in killing the Mt. Hood Freeway if we hadn’t done this first.”

#### **Now and Then**

When I asked the Belchers and Howell if we were in danger of becoming complacent or resting too much on the laurels of past successes —and forgetting how to organize and coalesce around neighborhood, regional issues—I was greeted with a rousing, “Yes.”

“I would frame it this way,” Bob Belcher elaborates. “With this event of 40 years ago, this was

kind of like our neighborhood—downtown. We lived in Irvington, but in a way, we worked downtown, we played down there, we just wanted it better. ...These days we're grappling with a regional project [the Columbia River Crossing] that has a misunderstood impact on this city and surrounding, adjacent neighborhoods and all kinds of ramifications that we can't begin to understand. It's ended up to be not just a simple neighborhood issue that a lot of us in the past could identify with and get rallied to, with an Allison Belcher haranguing us to get out and go to the picnic. It's far more complex ... how do we make the point these days?"

The challenges of so-called progress continue today as they did then.

### One Small Step

In the period between 1970 and 1980, Portland, spurred on in large part by Neil Goldschmidt's visionary leadership, first as City Commissioner, then Mayor, made a number of pivotal decisions that not only transformed public space and transportation, but heightened citizen's involvement in the future of urban development.

The first of these landmark decisions was the closing/removal of Harbor Drive—a key step in transforming Portland from a car-oriented city to a more pedestrian-oriented one; the second major step was the 1972 Downtown Plan—a well organized, citizen-centric plan that showed a clear Jane Jacobs-influenced mixed-use core and marked a distinct turning point towards more vibrant public spaces.

Other seminal decisions that followed in the wake of this period were:

- the establishment of the Office of Neighborhood Associations in 1973 by a newly-elected Mayor Goldschmidt (the result of a Task Force convened by former Mayor Shrink to explore the idea of a formal structure for neighborhood and district citizen participation)
- the defeat of the Mount Hood Freeway. In 1974, strong citizen-led movement backed by the Portland City Council snuffed plans for a Mount Hood Freeway, diverting federal funding to build the downtown transit mall, eastside light rail, and other transit projects
- the vision for Pioneer Courthouse Square was begun in 1970 following a vote that

denied a permit to build a 12-story parking structure on the site of the former Meier & Frank two-story parking structure

- the Comprehensive Land Use Plan, which was adopted by the City Council in 1980, established an urban growth boundary to hinder sprawl and amplify more transit-oriented development.

"Looking at the connection, 'did RFP influence subsequent events?'" Belcher rhetorically wonders. "We were just focused on trying to make one thing happen, but I think that the Riverfront success made a powerful impression on a lot of people." Carl Abbott agrees that RFP helped "show people a small victory, so that coming out for the next fight seemed possible."

### One Giant Step

In a year of generation-defining 40th anniversaries—the Moon landing, Woodstock—I was surprised when August 19th passed with nary a notice of Riverfront for People and their picnic, an event that signalled a shift in the dynamics of civic will, power and process on the regional stage.

While the picnic was maybe not so raucous and mind-altering as Woodstock or frontier-expanding as the Moon's one-small-step-for-man, I think it's only fitting to acknowledge, as Carl Abbott astutely observed, "It is the capital of a small revolution that is epitomized by Riverfront for People."

It was certainly not the era's first citizen activism in the region, but an early and significant success—a small victory that inspired subsequent examples of collective community efficacy like the visionary 1972 Downtown Plan (which had at its core strong citizen participation) and the eventual monumental defeat of the Mt. Hood Freeway in 1974, the event that sowed the seeds of the region's light-rail system.

A small revolution deserves at least a modest picnic in its honor. **M**

*Tim DuRoche is a Portland-based writer and cultural advocate and the Community Programs Manager for Portland Center Stage. His writings on art and culture, urban history, and cultural policy have appeared in a number of publications, including Oregon Humanities, Willamette Week, The Oregonian.*