

In Out View, Oct. 21: Progress Times Two

Vancouver officials take significant steps on freeway lid, waterfront development

One freeway lid plus one redeveloped waterfront site equals a pretty good day's work. Such is the performance turned in Monday by Vancouver city officials. OK, so maybe there was no physical evidence that anything was actually accomplished on those two downtown projects, but a couple of momentous decisions were made that signal meaningful progress.

On Monday morning a seven-member jury selected a park-like design for a two-block cap proposed for Interstate 5 just south of Evergreen Boulevard. Then on Monday night, the Vancouver City Council unanimously approved an agreement with developers of the 32-acre, \$1 billion waterfront project at the old Boise Cascade site.

Downtown revitalization is sandwiched between both projects, the freeway cap to the east and the waterfront project to the southwest of Esther Short Park. Viewed in their individual contexts, here is why each of Monday's decisions could affect the entire county.

Freeway cap

As Andrea Damewood reported in Tuesday's *Columbian*, landscape architects Gustafson Guthrie Nichol of Seattle and architecture firm Allied Works of Portland won out over three other proposals for the cover that is proposed for the freeway. It's part of the much larger Columbia River Crossing project.

What happened on Monday was highly preliminary. In fact, no one is sure yet what the freeway cap will cost. Elson Strahan, president and CEO of Fort Vancouver National Trust, told Damewood that planning will intensify and cost figures will be determined after more decisions are made by CRC engineers. But what's already known is that this freeway cap will serve at least three main functions. It will heal to a small degree the literal gap torn through downtown several decades ago when Interstate 5 was built. It will reconnect downtown with the Fort Vancouver area. And it will enhance the artistic and cultural features of the city center.

When the heart of a community is made more healthy, the whole county benefits. Local residents and travelers will be impressed by the cover that will showcase a central walkway and smaller paths to a "Northwest Meadow," a reflective pond, wind-driven, curved, steel boughs that swivel on posts to create harmonic sounds and other natural scenes.

This will be the second pedestrian crossing of the freeway with natural enhancements. The Land Bridge was completed last year over state Highway 14, connecting the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site with the waterfront trail system.

Columbia Waterfront

Although the city council vote was unanimous, it was no rubber stamp. City representatives have grilled economic development officials for months as this agreement has evolved. More challenging questions emerged Monday night. The politicians deserve praise for holding planners accountable on this project and protecting more than \$15 million in city money that will be spent.

Ultimately, though, there was a total commitment by the council to improving the waterfront site. And a wise decision it was. Other commitments include \$8 million from developers for off-site infrastructure improvements, \$2.5 million from BNSF and large state and federal contributions.

Developers promise 2,500 residential units, 400,000 square feet of office space, 100,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space and — most importantly from a public perspective — 10 acres of parks, trails and open space.

Projected tax revenues over the next quarter of a century include \$40.3 million to the city, \$50.9 million to other local governments and \$146.9 million to the state.