A rendering of the waterfront reveals an accessible and easy-to-navigate urban shoreline with recreational, entertainment and dining options galore.
The project to rebuild the waterfront arguably began almost two decades ago, back in 2001, when the Nisqually Earthquake forced the city, region and state to come up with a plan to replace the damaged, seismically vulnerable Viaduct. Years of debate over how (and whether) to replace it ended up in 2008, when then Governor Christine Gregoire, Mayor Greg Nickels and King County Executive Ron Sims decided to bury the roadway and private redevelopment.

Years of additional debate ensued. In 2010, after an international competition, the city chose New York City–based James Corner Field Operations to design the waterfront park. When local architects and others criticized Corner’s initial proposal as too grandiose, Corner scaled back, and then back again—eliminating hot tubs, gondolas and floating swimming pools—to a plan with a more modest, but still grand walkway, flexible spaces for outdoor activities, such as a winter ice skating rink and a mini soccer field; and a wide waterfront pathway flanked by hundreds of trees.

“THIS PLAN IS REALLY BIG AND AMBITIOUS AND BOLD, AND THE CITY HAS STUCK WITH IT.”

“We have really learned a lot, and we’ve grown through a healthy set of iterations and steps to hone in on the right scale to make a really gorgeous connection and be as efficient and cost effective as it can be,” Friends of the Waterfront’s Executive Director Heidi Hughes says.

Significantly, the park plan includes ongoing maintenance, which will cost more than $6 million a year (about $4.8 million from the nonprofit Friends of the Waterfront, Seattle, created in 2012 to help fund and operate the park).

Homelessness is an issue that has come up again and again in discussions, particularly as waterfront property owners debated a special taxing district, known as a local improvement district (LID), which would raise their taxes to reflect the increase in their property values gained from proximity to the park.

Perhaps more important to the safety and security of the park, Hughes says, will be making sure every space is occupied and used year-round, a strategy that has already proved successful in Westlake and Occidental parks downtown. “Rather than thinking about the central waterfront as a fallow space where events pop up, there will be all sizes of programming of various scopes and scales,” including yoga and tai chi classes, and festivals and concerts that draw thousands of people.

Last summer, Hughes says, the Friends group implemented a small-scale version of this approach and saw arrests and citations drop significantly. Using programming and outreach to supplement security, Hughes says Friends will provide its own “ambassadors” —similar to the Downtown Seattle Association’s Downtown Ambassadors—who will walk through the park, talking to visitors and providing outreach to homeless residents.

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“Ultimately, the success of the waterfront will depend on whether people show up—not just for events and concerts, but to live, dine, shop and walk along the new waterfront beach and promenade. ivory’s CEO Bob Donegan, whose own flagship restaurant sits on the waterfront for nearly a year during seawall construction, says he’s bullish about the waterfront’s future.

“One of the things I’ve looked at in the past, to see if a public project is successful, is whether the private sector is investing alongside it. Donegan says, “If you look from Alaskan Way up to First Avenue, from the stadiums to Pike Place Market, there has been more than $1 billion in private investments over the last four years.” These investments include the newly developed 16-story Cyrene Apartments, currently appraised at $98 million; Beacon Capital Partners’ $13.5 million purchase, and subsequent $186 million sale, of the Maritime Restaurant at Pier 54; and a $46 million‒$2 million from the non-profit Friends of the Waterfront, Seattle, created in 2012 to help fund and operate the park.

“My vision for this project is that people feel like this is their waterfront,” Donegan says. “People are coming back.”

By 2023, if all goes according to plan, those buildings will look out on a revamped waterfront full of people and things to do—something that’s equally accessible to waterfront property owners and anyone who happens to wander down on their lunch break to take a look at the view.

Coast Guard

The new, eco-conscious seawall is the foundation of the waterfront's future.

AFTER 70 YEARS OF PROTECTING Seattle’s waterfront, the city’s original seawall, completed in 1934, left a lot of room for improvement. By early in the 21st century, city leaders knew it needed to be replaced. The Elliott Bay tide infiltration cracks in the wall, carrying fill soil from underneath Alaskan Way back into the ocean and creating potential hazards, erosion and disease. And grapple-tined wood-boring marine organisms ate away at the timbers that held up the wall. This alarming erosion prompted voters to pass a key in 2012 for the construction of a new barrier.

The new seawall, finished in 2017, is hailed as the foundation of Seattle’s future waterfront, and for good reason. It marks a new era of connection between land and sea. The wall was moved 50 feet eastward to accommodate Seattle’s bold vision for the waterfront while improving the coastal ecosystem. According to Heidi Hughes, executive director of Friends of the Waterfront Seattle, the original waterfront development damaged Elliott Bay’s intertidal habitat in a number of ways, including harming the salmon migration corridor. The new seawall aims to restore the ecosystem for aquatic life.

There are many ways the seawall project has addressed this goal. Tinted concrete increases insulation, helping to improve a microclimate that supports aquatic plants and animals. Reflective riparian vegetation.

The seawall is a microcosm of the vision for the larger waterfront project—new and improved while fostering innovative design with a respect for Seattle’s history and environment. BEAT LYRON


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UP CLOSE

View of the seawall across from Occidental Park. The seawall is a microcosm of the larger vision for the waterfront. Some timely data courtesy of Friends of Waterfront Seattle. For more details, visit friendswaterfrontseattle.org.

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The Waterfront Seattle plan calls for public spaces with room for activities such as soccer, ice skating and concerts; a roadway with a dedicated bike path; overlooks and other places to revel in spectacular mountain and water views; and improved corridors that connect the waterfront with the rest of the city. Some parts of the plan are well underway—the Pike Place MarketFront opened in 2017—while the entire 26-block area isn’t expected to be completed until 2023.