

How Seattle's new waterfront could boost a battered downtown and impact tech companies

7-9 minutes

You might say the Seattle waterfront project has faced a few setbacks.

There was the multi-year fight about how to solve the problem of the crumbling Alaskan Way viaduct. The round-and-round debates about tunnels versus surface streets versus elevated highways. There was the time tunnel-boring machine “Bertha” gave up the ghost and sat stone-still beneath the city for two years. And the time Pier 58 fell into Puget Sound.

Then there's the most recent (although arguably smaller) setback: A [concrete workers strike](#) put some parts of the \$756-million project on hold for months.

But despite it all, changes are happening along Seattle's downtown shoreline. And those changes could have ripple effects — possibly boosting a battered downtown and perhaps even impacting how fast-growing tech companies interact with the city.

“That's the work we have to do as a city — investing in spaces, not just jobs,” said venture capitalist Chris DeVore, who sits on the board of Friends of Waterfront Seattle. “Sure, people want a good-

paying job, but they also want a rich experience of living in a city and connecting with civic spaces.”

Standing where the city meets the water, it’s hard to recall exactly what the waterfront was like just a few years ago — when the double-decker Alaskan Way viaduct towered above in all its concrete glory and the roar of overhead traffic drowned out everything else. There’s still no shortage of concrete and cars, and the sound of construction rings out intermittently, but the buildings of Pioneer Square seem closer now, as do the waves of Puget Sound.



(GeekWire Photo / Kevin Lisota)

To see what the waterfront will be like when work wraps up in 2024, it helps to have a tour guide.

One chilly morning in March, Seattle philanthropist and civic leader Maggie Walker stood at the corner of Alaskan Way and Marion Street and gestured north to the lanes of traffic framed by

construction sites.

“This is really a complete reinvention of this part of the city,” Walker said. “If you look up here, everything that has cars on it today will be green.”

For the last decade, Walker has chaired [Friends of Waterfront Seattle](#), the nonprofit organization that has shepherded the project along by providing fundraising and programming efforts. As the waterfront nears completion during the next two years, the group will turn its attention to publicizing the park and its amenities to locals.

Many familiar tourist haunts will remain — the Ivar’s Fish Bar, the Seattle Great Wheel, Ye Olde Curiosity Shop — but the 20-acre park will also include six playgrounds for children, a two-way bike path, large-scale art installations, garden spaces filled with thousands of plants, a pedestrian-accessible beach, event spaces, and an elevated walkway connecting the waterfront with Pike Place Market.

Continuing north along Alaskan Way, past the place where bench swings will one day hang in a line, Walker put it this way: “This is now the front porch for the city.”

And that front porch might make for valuable curb appeal when prospective newcomers come calling.





A mockup of the new-look waterfront in Seattle. (Image by James Corner Field Operations, courtesy of the City of Seattle)

For decades, Seattle built a reputation as a desirable place to work, attracting tech workers with promises of urban amenities alongside the region's natural beauty. But downtown has struggled lately, especially after the pandemic cleared its streets of office workers. Crime rates have spiked in the last few years, and some companies – [Amazon included](#) – are [shying away from](#) reopening downtown offices.

Worries abound about remote work chipping away at Seattle's status as a tech-superstar, and neighboring Bellevue [is snagging offices](#) that might have otherwise set up shop in Seattle.

Even so, Seattle still has a certain type of magnetism. A [recent study](#) from Axios found that Seattle is the most desirable location for college students due to its “superstar tech-hub status, cool climate, green-energy embrace and music and art scene.”

And ultimately, that's one thing advocates of the new waterfront are trying to capture.

“This whole project, to me, is like an accelerant of Seattle's brand,” said Jon Scholes, president and CEO of the Downtown Seattle Association. “To be able to put a kayak into the water down here?”

It's definitely not something you could have done while rolling along the viaduct at 50-miles-an-hour. But some critics of the project say the new waterfront will still be too car-centric, with several lanes of vehicles feeding into the ferry terminal, and buses

diverting up into downtown neighborhoods.

“It doesn’t take much to beat a double-decker highway viaduct, but for its colossal budget, we should expect a lot more,” Doug Trumm, executive director of The Urbanist, wrote in a recent [opinion piece](#).

He added: “This was a \$5 billion mistake that puts cars first, the park second, transit and bikes third, and the climate last.”



(Image by James Corner Field Operations, courtesy of the City of Seattle)

Criticisms aside, the waterfront project has helped sway some tech companies toward setting up shop downtown. Real estate tech startup Flyhomes opened offices a block from Pier 56 when it became clear that the viaduct’s demise meant more natural light in offices along Western Avenue, said Ryan Dibble, the company’s chief operating officer. And now, the idea of a waterfront that’s not just for tourists is an appealing prospect.

“The primary concern we had for the waterfront was that the food

and beverage options needed to be tailored to Flyhomes and our team, being a professional crowd rather than a tourist crowd,” Dibble said. “It’s great to know that there will be more options in the area for meals that our employees are looking for when they spend time at the office, like a healthy sandwich or salad.”

“I’d hate for it to be seen as a park that’s just a playground for Amazon employees.”

Eric Hollenbeck, a vice president at software company Highspot, said he’s also looking forward to the waterfront’s completion – especially as the company brings more employees back into the office this summer. Highspot’s offices are just north of Pike Place Market, which will be connected to the waterfront by an elevated walkway.

“What excites me about the waterfront is kind of connecting the city’s core and downtown with the new green spaces,” Hollenbeck said.

One part of the waterfront project is up and running now, despite ongoing construction. Pier 62 is offering community events, including exercise classes, walking tours and music, with a focus on BIPOC performers.

Despite the potential appeal for tech incomers, DeVore said the space has been designed with the goal of being inclusive of all Seattleites, including indigenous tribes. He said that intention will be reflected in the inclusion of art installations and event programming, among other things.

“I’d hate for it to be seen as a park that’s just a playground for Amazon employees,” DeVore said.

Walker, heading back toward the rocky beach just yards away from the bricks of Pioneer Square, noted that the waterfront is full of history – and much of that history is rooted in inequity.

“There are layers of meaning down here,” Walker said. “And this can be a place that articulates that.”