



The Oregonian

Governor launches Milwaukie's riverfront project

The city's plan would redevelop the downtown, creating a park and opening it to the Willamette River

Thursday, June 23, 2005

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The Oregonian

MILWAUKIE -- Gov. Ted Kulongoski hoisted a sledgehammer Wednesday and smashed it into the side of the former Milwaukie Antique Mall, one of the last two buildings standing between downtown Milwaukie and the Willamette River.

The razing clears the way for the Milwaukie Riverfront Park project, a cornerstone of the city's redevelopment plans. The project includes widening and sprucing up McLoughlin Boulevard, restoring Kellogg and Johnson creeks and turning the scruffy section of riverfront between them into a leafy recreation area.

The governor's ceremonial first swing symbolized his role in the project. The city has long yearned to develop its waterfront, but its efforts didn't gather momentum until the nonprofit Oregon Solutions program became involved.

The 4-year-old organization, which Kulongoski leads, uses the governor's clout to bring together public agencies with private organizations to jump-start projects throughout the state.

JoAnn Herrigel, Milwaukie's community services director, said the city's goals dovetailed with those of Oregon Solutions, which "was looking for a Willamette River-related project in the Portland area."

The nonprofit liked the Milwaukie project because it combined economic development with environmental and quality-of-life objectives.

"We're trying to get people once again to see the beauty of the river and the value of using it for recreation," Kulongoski said after the ceremony.

Milwaukie residents may get their first look at plans for the park at Riverfest on July 23. Herrigel said the city expects to present two plans to the public as a starting point for discussion. "By the end of summer or early fall, hopefully we will arrive at a consensus of what we want to see on the riverfront," Herrigel said.

Among the possibilities are a redesigned boat ramp and boat-trailer parking area, benches and walking paths, enhanced native vegetation, an amphitheater and a children's play area. Whatever the park eventually includes, longtime Milwaukie residents said it will be a blessing just to have an unobstructed view of the river.

"So many people don't even know this exists," said Mayor Jim Bernard, gesturing toward the span of riverbank hidden behind the antique mall and Vic's Willamette View Tavern.

Bernard isn't one of those people, though.

"I was born and raised in Milwaukie," he said. "When I was young, I used to go fishing down here and catch carp off the dock."

Candace Houston, a resident of Milwaukie for more than 50 years, looks forward to seeing the river from McLoughlin Boulevard. "Right now, you're just driving through here, and you don't even realize you're driving through Milwaukie. The waterfront will just mark the community of Milwaukie a little more."

Bernard said he thinks the project will make the city's business center a more attractive place to stop and walk around. Gathered under a Portland Gas and Electric tent, surrounded by flowers provided by the Milwaukie Rotary, the crowd of public officials, business leaders and local residents at yesterday's ceremony seemed optimistic about that prospect.

But one onlooker didn't join in the cheers as a trackhoe ripped into the buildings.

Ryan Oldham, former bartender at Vic's Tavern, said with regret, "That was the only good dive bar in Milwaukie."

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