

Michael Fitzgerald

WATERFRONT TRAIL, WHILE CONTROVERSIAL, A SECOND CHANCE FOR CITY

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Waterfront Connection Plan



By **Michael Fitzgerald**

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Record Columnist

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Surprisingly, the city is moving forward with plans for a 5-mile bicycle/pedestrian trail circling the waterfront and leading all the way to Louis Park.

It's a lovely plan. Property owners are dead set against it.

In any case, the proposal for a Stockton Waterfront Connection Plan is, at least, an opportunity to reconsider downtown revitalization, which has lost much public support.

The Waterfront Connections Plan would stitch 2.5 miles of trail onto 2.4 miles of existing promenade to create nearly 5 miles of riverside strolling and fishing.

The trail would meander from the south bank west of Interstate 5, veering around the channel head to the north bank. Nearing I-5 again, it would briefly detour inland around the "working waterfront."

Passing under I-5, and returning to the water, it would traverse lands long closed to the public, ending at Louis Park.

Part of this plan was approved in 1970, but it fits the city's new principles of smart growth, fewer vehicle miles traveled and densifying downtown.

"We're looking at the long-term betterment of the city," said the Revitalization Department's Kitty Walker, the project's manager. "Part of that is looking at its assets and how best we can capitalize on those assets. That not only makes it a better place to live, it also improves property values."

The trail is one step in a long-range vision. Planners imagine mixed-use districts of housing, historical buildings readapted to new uses, new business construction and smooth connections in and out of surrounding neighborhoods - a revived, teeming waterfront, restored to its historical prominence.

The trail also comports with the General Plan Settlement Agreement, a lawsuit settlement requiring Stockton to

sprawl less and reduce greenhouse gasses.

"The bigger picture is to look at alternatives and ways to more effectively get folks from the surrounding neighborhoods and get them downtown without getting into a single-occupancy vehicle," Walker said.

The plan's greenness qualified it for about \$300,000 in Measure K money, which the city matched. Sacramento urban design firm Jacobs extended and updated the 1970 plan.

Between the idea and the reality, however, fall the property owners. Their positions range from wary to Over My Dead Body.

"If you take my waterfront, you're taking the soul and the heart of my property, the reason I bought that property," protested Greg Culhane.

Culhane owns 3.5 acres of south bank. His factory manufactures pharmaceutical products. He has a boat and dock, too.

Culhane dreads losing 30 to 50 feet of river frontage because, "You'll probably devalue my price by 25 percent."

Landowners worry public access means crime. Some distrust Stockton government to do the project successfully, given the city's checkered redevelopment history.

The trail's designer, Jeffrey A. Townsend, said the trail can be narrowed and "defensible": "Clearly defined, well-lit, accessible to police, and landscaping will be see-through."

Both he and Walker said the city need not summon the ogre of eminent domain. They hope "forward-looking" investors who like the project will buy property from those who do not.

Failing that, the trail can be routed away from waterfront holdouts to city streets, Walker said. Though people would rather push their strollers along the water.

Other Stocktonians love the trail plan.

"I strongly believe that the key to attracting 30-somethings and urbanites like myself to stay in Stockton and to invest is to have a hip, cool downtown," said Jeremy Terhune, who spoke at a recent meeting.

"There are lots of people in my community that I know that love to ride their bikes, love to be downtown, would love to take their children down to the waterfront," he said.

Redevelopment stumbled when it forgot the commons it seeks to revive are for common people. But I still believe it must be seen through.

The city of Stockton is reaching for its identity. It can brand itself from within by creating a new focal point. Or it can allow itself to be branded from without by the likes of Forbes. The latter is equivalent to stepping into a cage fight with Fedor Emelianenko.

Maybe revitalization already has.


"I don't know how you're going to get that whole trail in," another property owner said at a meeting. "There's going to be a whole lot of fighting going on."

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J. Timothy Vial

The city truly needs a vital and interesting waterfront; such an extended trail would take us a long way to getting families back to our dormant downtown area and waterfront. Property owners would ultimately see an increase in their property values, not a decline. The fear of crime on such a trail system has been proven over-blown all across the country. Just look at the waterfront trail system in Sacramento, the Centennial Trail in Spokane, the waterfront trails in Portland and Seattle - huge community draws and jewels in those city's downtown revival. More power to the City of Stockton and forward-thinking property owners!

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