

Reclaiming the Waterfront

by Teresa Gillotti*

People have been drawn to water since the dawn of civilization, but American cities and towns have had a complicated relationship with water. "Water is a powerful draw and can help instill a strong sense of place," observed Kent Robertson, Director of Community Development at Saint Cloud State University in Minnesota. "The fact that many downtowns are built near a body of water is a tremendous asset that should not be wasted."

History of Waterfront Development

In early industrial times, waterways served as an industrial input and as essential travel and trading routes. Cities large and small grew around these waterways, until railroads, cars and airplanes made cities turn their focus to highways and airports. It wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that communities started to realize that waterfronts were not only underused, but that a key natural, economic and historical feature of the community was being hidden behind any combination of industrial buildings, dying commercial ports, warehouse buildings or abandoned land. Buildings had turned their backs on the water and public access was prohibited, even in downtown districts.

Some redevelopment starting in the 1970s and 1980s brought an incredible economic boost to a number of cities. For example, Portland, Maine successfully redeveloped Old Port, a waterfront warehouse district, emphasizing the district's historical sensibilities.

Economic Value of Waterfront Development

Waterfront development provides many economic opportunities including the chance to retrofit existing buildings, the reduction in infrastructure costs and the potential increases in the number of jobs and tax revenue.

The city of Sheboygan, Wisconsin is planning to redevelop one of the last city-owned pieces of waterfront. Formerly a brownfield site, South Pier is slated to become a mix-use development including a family resort, riverfront promenade, lakefront Eco Park and trails, retail and office space, live/work units and a family entertainment attraction.

This development relies heavily on strong connections between the city and the waterfront. Steve Grabow, professor in the University of Wisconsin-Extension Jefferson County, notes that recent research has shown a link between economic growth and quality of life amenities like riverwalks, trails and urban parks. He provides the example of Fort Atkinson, whose riverfront revitalization includes new downtown housing adjacent to the riverwalk and Glacial River Bike Trail that crosses over the Rock River. New retail and commercial redevelopment has occurred downtown since the addition of the new riverwalk, and an old manufacturing plant is being redeveloped adjacent to the trail.

Providing for the Public

Waterfront development encourages people to come back to the water for entertainment, recreation and quality of life amenities. In providing for the public, the University of Idaho Community Design and Planning Center recommends planning for these three key elements:

1. Meet Basic Human Needs

This includes creating a safe environment through lighting and clear sight lines, rest rooms, drinking fountains, seating, trash receptacles, aesthetically pleasing locations with a view of the water and clear signage directing visitors through the area. Creating year-round use is preferred as is the overall emphasis on the waterfront.



Source: City of Sheboygan:
<http://ci.sheboygan.wi.us/Development/DevelopmentHome.html>

Public waterfront access is essential and consists of both access to the water itself and access to waterfront amenities. All waterfront areas should have separate pedestrian areas from those designed for motor vehicles. Parking areas should not detract from parkland or the aesthetics of the area. ADA access to the waterfront must be included as well as general water access in the form of docking spaces, if appropriate.

2. Provide Recreational Opportunities

Many waterfronts are peppered with parks, trails and public performance spaces. There is room for variety and creativity as recreational areas can feature any combination of playgrounds, grassy spaces, skate parks, fishing piers and more. Multi-purpose spaces are also encouraged. Examples include a central area used for outdoor markets, food vendors, festival space and picnics or an amphitheatre for various events.

3. Develop Paths and Promenades

It is important to connect the waterfront to the downtown commercial and retail district with pedestrian and bicycle paths. These connections should be secure and provide for pedestrian access separate from automobile access.

The location of these paths and their construction should contribute to a sense of place either complementing the current design or enhancing it through landscaping, benches, public art and architecture features. Celebrating historical features through markers and tours also contributes to place making.

Involving the Public

The process of waterfront development is like any planning process, it is most successful when the public is actively involved. Ross Cantwell, presenter at a 1998 Waterfront Development Conference in New Brunswick notes some key steps to the waterfront development process:

- Make the development plan realistic, but without sacrificing creativity and vision
- Understand the community. Discover how it uses the land and how the community would like to see it used in the future. For example, what level of access is desired? Is an increase in tourism desired?

- Each community is at a different stage in the process. Don't jump ahead, but acknowledge the successes and create possible goals.
- Depending on the use of waterfront land, preparing it for development can be expensive. Research the various funding mechanisms from public/private partnerships to environmental, conservation and Brownfield abatement grants and funding.
- Partner with the community and provide for their needs. Try to identify common threads in public needs and desires for the waterfront. The process of public involvement is more important than the final plan on paper. Work to stimulate and educate the community and maintain their involvement.
- Create a clear and easily communicable implementation timeline. Within the development process, start programming events to promote community buy-in and to establish regular events at or near the site.

Conclusion

Waterfront development benefits from big picture thinking. Simply trying to grow businesses in the area may not consider the amenities the waterfront can provide. Combining public engagement, public access and economic development can result in a stronger plan to re-energize the waterfront district to the benefit of all.

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Sources:

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City of Sheboygan South Pier District Webpage:
<http://ci.sheboygan.wi.us/Development/SouthPier.html>

Presentation of Professor Chris De Sousa at the 2005 Wisconsin Waterfront Revitalization Conference: *Benefits of Waterfront Revitalization – Economic, Social and* <http://www.glc.org/wiconference/benefits.html>

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