

Arguments for a Better Waterfront Path at Nichol's Boat Basin

Next Monday, the City of Hood River Planning Commission considers Naito Development LLC's application for a hotel, commercial building and cable park at Nichol's Boat Basin. So far public controversy has focused on the cable park, but that's not the only issue at stake.

The developer is legally required to construct a Pedestrian Access Way (PAW) across their property. The Port and City have long envisioned a continuous multi-use path running the length of the entire Hood River waterfront. This property is the vital middle link in the chain connecting the east side of the waterfront (the pedestrian bridge, the Marina, and access to downtown) and the west side (the proposed top-of-bank path along the west side of the boat basin, the Event site and Waterfront Park).

The Naito's chosen route for the path mars what is otherwise a very fine development plan. As you can see on the site plan, the Naito's have located the path to the south of the commercial building along the new private road. Rather than the visual splendor of the boat basin, Columbia River and Washington hills, the developers have chosen to give the public an up-close and personal view of the freeway and their 234-space parking lot. This is the **only** instance from the Hook to the Hood River Inn where a building comes between a walker and the water.

The non-profit think-tank Project for Public Spaces (www.pps.org) has studied hundreds of waterfronts around the world researching what works and what doesn't in creating great public spaces. They advise:

"It is essential that the waterfront be accessible for people's use to the greatest extent possible. The goal of continuity is of paramount importance. Waterfronts with continuous public access are much more desirable than those where the public space is interrupted. Even small stretches where the waterfront is unavailable to the public greatly diminish the experience."

I highly encourage you to walk the property. The qualitative difference in experience from a waterside route to a freeway view is hard to understand from looking at a plan, but strikingly obvious when on the ground. If you aren't able to get there, I've made a video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWd9dEF1V-0> to give you an impression of the different experiences on both paths. I did my best to film from the location of the path as on the site plan and from a location just to the north of the commercial building where I would prefer the path. I took both videos within minutes of each other, used the same settings on my camera, and did not edit for sound or picture quality. Yes, the waterside path really is that much more tranquil (listen to the bird song!) because the piles of earth that are there now shield the path from freeway noise just as the commercial building will.

The applicant contends we can use the decks that surround the commercial building as "boardwalks" which are part of the waterfront trail system. They are unlikely to function that way. Taking a right angle turn from a sidewalk onto a deck is not a natural or comfortable through route. No one will be under any confusion that they are on a public trail; the impression will be of walking onto private property. I suggest you walk by the Chamber of Commerce building and on their waterside deck—its clearly a

continuous through path along the marina (you don't have to take a sharp turn to get on it) but it just feels weird to walk there because it has the aura of private property. On the wide East and North decks of proposed commercial building, café seating is planned for the restaurant and coffee shop. Most pedestrians will feel uncomfortable picking their way through a forest of tables in order to navigate around the building. I don't imagine that the decks will welcome bikes, roller skaters or even my big wet dog. The decks are amenities provided for customers of the commercial building, they are not welcoming public paths.

Normally I hesitate to dictate to a private landowner, but the Naito property at Nichol's Boat Basin is unique. It is the only piece of privately owned land in a mile long stretch of waterfront. The rest of the waterfront is owned by "we the people" through the Port of Hood River. Because of its singular status, the Naito lot has a quasi-public function in ensuring the continuity of our waterfront experience. The City recognized that special status when they took the unusual step of requiring a PAW as a condition of the property's rezone from Industrial to Commercial in 2006 (rezones are created through ordinance and it is uncommon for them to be conditioned).

Additionally, to complete their project, the developers rely on a large degree of public cooperation: one-third of their parking lot will be on publically owned land (ODOT and the Port are both leasing parcels to them) and of course, the nine acres of water they would like to lease from the Port for their cable park. This sort of public/private cooperation in development is to be highly encouraged, but as in any negotiation, each side has interests it needs to protect. In this case, we need to protect our investment in the waterfront. Through the Port and the City, the public has spent millions and millions of dollars over the years with more aggressive investment yet to come as Lot 1 is developed and Urban Renewal pursued (\$5.5 million in the next 6 years). The Port should be assertive in its lease negotiations: "You want to use our land and water, as part of the deal we want to direct the location of the path so that it best completes our waterfront experience." This is just the normal horse-trading you do when you want to make a deal and both parties have interests to protect.

Portland is home to Naito Development and most of their projects have been there. Since 1988 with the adoption of the Willamette Greenway Plan, the City of Portland has required developers to provide waterfront paths that run directly along the Willamette River (not around the back of buildings). Historically, the Naito's have been great promoters of riverfront walkways. I toured several such projects with Bob Naito in Portland; they are lovely, it's wonderful to walk by the river. We in Hood River should demand the same quality of experience. The developer and architect are smart, creative guys. They will come up with a waterfront path if we insist.

The developers might look at this from the angle of "what is the cheapest and easiest way to meet the City's requirements for a Pedestrian Access Way?" But we should look at it differently. This project is just one link in a long chain that will become the Hood River waterfront experience. We have the opportunity to make it an exhilarating chain of recreational, cultural and commercial attractions connected by beautiful paths that showcase our magnificent natural setting (and the light industrial development filling in the interior lots). But it takes getting all the pieces right. We should recognize that the success of the whole is dependent on creating the right parts with the right linkages. The path across the boat basin

should be considered in relation to its compatibility with both the existing waterfront trails and with our aspirations for the future.

Best,

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