

Downtown park needs money, square needs structural support

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It was Feb. 24, 2005, when Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen had an idea – and members of the City Council agreed.

And so the Garden of Surging Waves was born, a park that would shed light on the plight of the Chinese-Americans who built many important features of the area like the jetties, and worked in the canneries while being subject to terrible mistreatment, like execution if caught fishing for themselves.

Fast forward seven years since the park's inception, and Suenn Ho of MulvannyG2 Architecture has been hired; the park has been designed; the artwork has been commissioned and stored at the former Englund Marine Supply building; the location has moved from Astor Street to Heritage Square, the collapsed former-Safeway space and thus, redesigned; and the money is almost raised.

"I think we're getting really close," Van Dusen said.

The city is planning a groundbreaking April 14.

But money isn't the only support the project needs.

Infrastructure

The sidewalks that border Heritage Square, much like the rest of the sidewalks in the downtown area, are built on hollow ground. Held up by retaining walls that keep fill – dredged soil, sand, ashes and debris from the 1920s fire – in areas like the parking lot of Heritage Square, the sidewalks are cracking from underneath and if something isn't done soon, they are at risk of collapse.

"Fixing something that's 90 years old is very difficult," said City Engineer Jeff Harrington, from underground, about the structures holding up the city streets. "The chairwall itself was built so strong that its all in good shape. I don't believe there are any places in town that have experienced chairwall failure itself, since that was all built to the city standard at that time. But it was designed by an engineer and built for these plans. That's all in pretty good shape.

"The sidewalks were all built by different contractors, along with the buildings, and different varying quality, and also, these weren't designed to be driven on. Now, a lot of trucks park (at the curb). ... When they get really poor, there's really not a whole lot you can do. It's probably more cost-effective to tear it up and replace it."

Trekking through the sand, soot and damp dirt underground, Harrington and Astoria Public Works

Superintendent Ken Nelson pointed out the cracks, disintegrating steel bars and crumbling concrete that are supporting the sidewalk system today.

Animal paw prints, old items like glasses and boots, and dragging marks where thieves have crept underground to steal a minimal amount of wire and pipe, are evident in the dark and damp space.

Once deep enough in, the cracks in the support system are allowing a tiny bit of daylight to get into the underground space. There is a gap in space between the top and bottom of the crack.

The wall has buckled right under the parking lot where the Garden of Surging Waves is supposed to go.

“It’s very important to do our homework so that we will know – what are some of the hurdles? What are some of the approaches we need to take, like understanding the site?” Ho told the Astoria City Council Feb. 21. “It’s always good to do your homework. And based on our homework, because we have done surveys on the site, we have done a geotechnical study of the soil, we have done structural analysis of the site, because part of the site is actually hollow, just a concrete structure supporting the slab and its on the riverbank of the Columbia River which is dry. It’s just sand.

“So from the due diligence, we learned quite a bit about what’s going on below grade.”

And it’s not pretty.

“What we as a design team, when we saw that, we would like to call attention to consider some investment in repairing, upgrading, fixing, so that the deterioration is not going to become a disaster. Our structural engineer has a report that says this may not last long if we don’t catch the opportunity to repair it,” Ho explained.

That project will cost approximately \$200,000 for the quarter-block of repairs. With or without the Garden of Surging Waves, Astoria City Manager Paul Benoit said, that refurbishment will still have to occur.

“The issue that was kind of brought to light here that was interesting and that came from the due diligence is the chairwalls of the sidewalks surrounding Heritage Square is not unlike the chairwalls throughout much of the city, in bad need of repair,” Benoit said. “It’s an obligation of the city to fix that no matter what we do on that site. It would be, and not to be overdramatic, but irresponsible to build the Garden of Surging Waves and not take care of the infrastructure.”

Heritage Square’s sidewalks aren’t the only ones at risk of collapse. Almost all of the sidewalks north of the square and stretching throughout the downtown core are built with concrete pillars, rebar and chairwalls. But don’t expect the city to repair them all.

Benoit says the sidewalks are the responsibility of the property owner. Because the city owns the block neighboring City Hall that the Garden of Surging Waves will be built on, those sidewalks will be included as part of the project.

The rest of the sidewalks in downtown aren't the responsibility of the city.

During the recent renovation of City Hall, workers had to shore up the sidewalks on the east side of the building to ensure their safety while working underground.

Garden

The garden needs between \$900,000 and \$1 million for the northwest quarter section of Heritage Square.

To date, Benoit says the city has received approximately \$191,500 in donations for the garden project.

"These funds come from various fundraisers and the Astoria Bicentennial contribution (of \$25,000)," he said.

The City Council and Astoria Development Commission have allocated \$350,000 each, pushing the project funds up to \$891,500 toward the project. Part of those funds allocated by the Astoria Development Commission will be used to pay for the sidewalk repairs. The money pledged by the city comes from room tax dollars, for the betterment of the city. The city is also actively pursuing grants to fund the project.

Benoit explained that although they are close to reaching the \$1 million goal to install the pieces of artwork and landscape the Garden of Surging Waves, Heritage Square will cost approximately \$3 million as a whole, so any grants and funding the city can acquire will give them a boost toward the block's completion.

Rest of the block

When Ho and her team explored the block from above and below to make decisions for design, they made a unique discovery, one that won't go to waste.

"One area in the plaza on the upper corner of the block, the northeast corner of the block, under the sidewalk they were able to see something that was quite a discovery for the design team," Ho said.

"There is a subterranean electrical traffic signal control room that was built in the 1920s and it's still intact. Of course, it's not in use but we are going to daylight it, and showcase a real historic component of the site.

"The opposite corner of the lot in front of City Hall is the cast bronze dragon and monkey lantern and so book-ending the block, you have two corners with a feature introduction, a beacon of a view point where people know this corner is the Garden of Surging Waves and this corner is the view of the Heritage Square."

Asian species of plants, including trees and flowers, will be planted in Heritage Square. A shallow saucer

will be made of the below-grade portion of the current block to create an amphitheater. Design drawings of the block show movies being projected onto the side of the American Legion building.

Other components include “liveable, breathable space,” around the garden, a curbless festival street for the Sunday Market on the Bankers Suite side of the lot, and a timeline boardwalk, displaying the history of the Chinese-Americans’ difficult beginning in the city of Astoria.