Kurt Hoehne

WaveWriter

The other side of the boating news

On the (Working) Waterfront

What if your business was in danger of going under water. Not financially. Literally. Not in 100 years, but in 10 or 20. That was one of the topics that took center stage at the Working Waterfronts Symposium in March in Tacoma. Hundreds of businesses, politicians and academics took part in a complex, four-day conference.

It's pretty much impossible to define a "working" waterfront in 30 words or less. That's what makes them so interesting. By working waterfronts we can assume some kind of business or businesses are involved, so basically anywhere there's fishing, shipping or boating.

Rising Waters

On Day 2, former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department Housing and Urban Development Ron Sims(yes, the former King County Executive) opened the plenary with that rising water issue front and center. Panelists including disaster preparedness experts, city planners and politicians all agreed that that preparations had to be made now for the water that will be coming over our ankles in the years to come. They also agreed that crises like Katrina and Sandy are necessary catalysts for action.

Climate change and rising waters are very real. One may question how much man has contributed to climate change, but there's no disagreement that it's happening and that there are already concrete ramifications.

Emergency planning consultant Eric Holdeman was pointed about this country's lack of disaster preparedness. "The U.S. is focused on the short term. We plan for the 50 or 100-year flood. In the Netherlands they're planning for the 10,000-year flood." He bemoaned the lack of redundancy in disaster planning. The picture Holdeman painted was straightforward and matter of fact, and that's what was scary. If some natural disaster were to hit this region, we could be in big trouble.

But the most graphic information came in the form of the maps Steve Goldbeck of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission presented. Of course nobody knows how fast the water will rise, but the Commission is working on the assumption that the Bay will rise 16" in 50 years. When Goldbeck showed the present and projected maps onscreen, there was an audible "ooh" from crowd.

Things will change, if not with the bang of an earthquake, than with the whimper of rising water. Our children and their children might not think too highly of us if we bequeath them this problem along with the national debt.

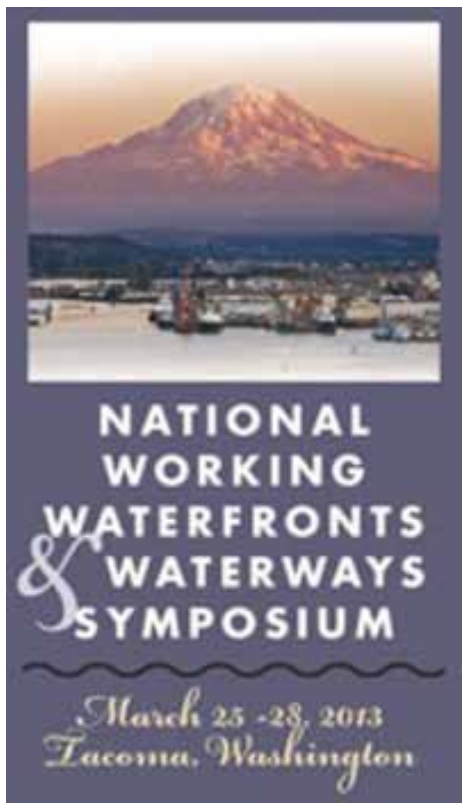
By the way, Ron Sims was the perfect moderator. He clearly has the respect of his peers and is the most energized and positive politician I've heard in a long time. His mix of heady associations with power and his Pacific Northwest self-effacing humor and optimism struck the right tone.

Breakouts

There were a total of 36 breakout sessions where experts presented specific topics. These ran the gamut from recreational fishing to the role of the US Economic Development Administration. I attended a couple of design-oriented sessions and found them extremely encouraging.

I did not know that 500-700 lbs. of that lovely toxic creosote live in each old pile left over from former docks etc. Left to rot or cut off at ground level, the piles just decay and continue to seep cresote. If they rot enough, they fall to the seabed and do even more damage. There are financial incentives to remove the piles even before development (that's the encouraging part), so it's a bit of a mystery why we still see any of them around.

And what about all those creatures that seem to like living on our hulls. Researcher Jeff Cordell of the University of Washington, and his grad students, are figuring other



places for them to live. Specifically, wouldn't it be great if an appropriate housing unit could be made along Seattle's soon-to-be-new seawall? The public could get a better look at creatures and salmon would have a better route to and from the Duwamish. Without going into too much detail, the creatures need some shallows and light and really like a textured wall with steps and overhangs. Next time you're on the Seattle waterfront, take a look down and you might see some of the test panels.

Even more interesting was the session Integrating Public Access and Habitat. The general theme of this conference was one of collaboration, and this was the perfect example. Representatives from the civil engineering firm and waterfront specialist Reid Middleton showed several examples of how, with planning, the public, private and industrial interests can all be accommodated. It's not always easy, but can be done.

One anecdote was about a waterfront walkway in Port Townsend. The construction permit for a shipyard with a 300-ton boat lift was issued with about 15 minutes of discussion. The public meeting on

Chart left - This chart shows the possible flooding that may occur as sea levels rise the estimated 16 inches over the next 50 years. The areas of light green adjacent to the waters San Francisco are the most susceptible and of particular concern are the area's at the south end of the Bay which are of significant economic importance.