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Coalition imagines livable city in 2100: open spaces and a 'green infrastructure'

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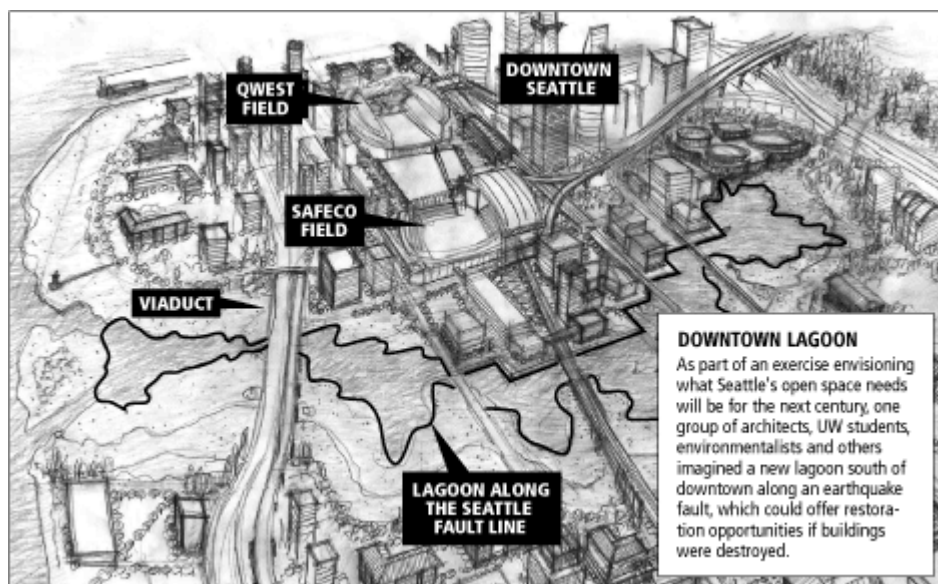
As a city, Seattle is not yet 140 years old.

In less than a century from now, its population is likely to have doubled, climate change could diminish its snowpack-fed power supply, and oil prices may have revolutionized the way we travel.

Imagining what kind of open spaces the city will need requires both vision and pragmatism, as the Olmsted brothers employed in the early 1900s when they mapped a series of parks and boulevards that Seattleites treasure today.

Ideas emerging from a two-day Seattle forum in February on developing a new legacy of "green infrastructure" range from restoring shorelines to reclaiming areas leveled by earthquakes to pursuing urban agriculture projects enabling neighborhoods to grow food.

Some participants wanted to see a percentage of the sales tax go toward putting lids on highways, establishing stricter codes to curb building in hazardous areas and expanding notions of open space to include streets, which constitute more than a third of the city's publicly owned land.



Source: Open Space Seattle 2100

"We asked people to be bold but also be practical -- to think about how things could get implemented," said Nancy Rottle, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Washington and co-director of a campaign called Open Space Seattle 2100.

That coalition of design professionals, students, neighborhood and transit advocates, parks lovers and environmentalists wants the city to create an open space task force and start planning for a bond proposal to replace the city's parks levy, which expires in 2008.

Diane Sugimura, director of the Seattle Department of Planning and Development, said urban open space will become ever more important as Seattle continues to invite population growth in hopes of preserving farmlands and forests.

"It's becoming very clear that this is an issue of necessity for the future of the city," she said. "We are growing and we are becoming more dense ... but we need to make sure we grow in the right way."

Exhibits on display at City Hall, culled from February's design extravaganza, include futuristic water taxis, individual monorail pods and streets that have been turned over to pedestrians and streams as our reliance on cars wanes.

Across the board, several themes emerged: saving green space by concentrating people in high-density buildings, constructing natural drainage systems and using common spaces for multiple purposes.

"We tried to imagine what would a future look like if we could choose the best available options," said Davidya Kasperzyk, an architect working with the group.

There were ideas for making neighborhoods more self-sustainable by generating electricity with wind, wave energy or even blowback from magnetic levitation transit cars.

For Greenwood, one group proposed gradually replacing houses and development sitting on the neighborhood's infamous bog by buying open space there.

Instead of fighting nature with buckling concrete and basements with sump pumps to keep water at bay, they suggested converting land ill-suited to development to a bog garden celebrating rare flora.

Other groups had similar plans for reclaiming blocks in parts of single-family neighborhoods where the city wouldn't be looking to concentrate housing. On the flip side, many envisioned dense urban clusters on ridge tops with views and away from liquefaction zones.

Tehia Kalebaugh, a landscape architecture student who worked on a Thornton Creek plan, said that neighborhood's success in preserving that watershed demonstrates that almost anything is possible with concerted effort over time.

"They've made it happen, getting properties acquired, adding wetlands, 'daylighting' streams bit by bit. ... If they can continue it for the next hundred years, they'll have restored most of the watershed," she said.

Although preserving ecological benefits was a clear theme, groups also wanted spaces to work for people, too.

"Citywide, there was definitely interest in green streets and green roofs," said Elizabeth Umbanhower, a UW graduate student. "But particularly in the Rainier Valley ... there was this sense of preserving a small community in a big city."

That means lots of community plazas, trail networks, pedestrian walkways, as well as schools and churches that could be used as places where people could interact.

There was also a lot of interest in remembering the valley's agricultural heritage by creating self-sustaining market gardens.

City Councilman Peter Steinbrueck, who is on the group's guidance committee, said there's great value in examining the future without the usual constraints that budgets or reality imposes.

Now, he said, the task will be to sort through the best ideas with more community participation and develop a cohesive vision.

TO LEARN MORE

For more information about Open Space Seattle 2100 -- and to see detailed maps and drawings -- visit www.open2100.org.

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