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Milwaukie tries new path to park

A nonprofit program is helping to assemble a public-private team to help finance the development of a riverfront park

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MILWAUKIE -- City officials have always talked of connecting their downtown business district to a riverfront park, if only they had the money.

Now, the 4-year-old Oregon Solutions program is bringing state, county and local government agencies together with private businesses and local organizations to help finance the city's longtime dream.

"Milwaukie has really struggled in the past because of its lack of resources to develop the park," said Brian Newman, former Milwaukie city councilman and now a member of the Metro Council. "But the reason we're really enthusiastic about this now is Gov. Ted Kulongoski's personal involvement and his message to state agencies to make it a priority."

Oregon Solutions grew out of a 2001 legislative bill endorsed by former Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber to help communities achieve goals through collaborative efforts. Over the past four years, the nonprofit program has helped create public-private partnerships on projects ranging from downtown redevelopment to rural irrigation and forest rehabilitation.

Steve Greenwood of Oregon Solutions said Milwaukie's riverfront park reminds him of Delta Ponds, an Oregon Solutions project in the Eugene area. Oregon Solutions brought the city of Eugene, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Land Management together with some private businesses and six Rotary Clubs to transform a series of gravel pits into an urban natural area with viewing stations and six miles of walking trails.

Sharing leadership of Oregon Solutions' efforts in Milwaukie are Metro's Newman and Dave Green, chairman of the city's Riverfront Board. The riverfront project will include restoration of three Willamette River tributaries -- Johnson, Kellogg and Spring creeks -- and long-term maintenance of Riverfront Park.

The role of Newman and Green "is really to bring people to the table," Newman said. Participants representing the Oregon Department of Transportation, the North Clackamas Parks and Recreation District, Clackamas County's Water Environment Services, North Clackamas Chamber of Commerce and local businesses such as Starbucks will figure out how to pay for the project.

More than 50 local, county and state officials and business leaders attended a Feb. 18 kickoff meeting for the project. A second meeting is scheduled from 9 a.m. to noon April 8 at the Johnson Creek Watershed Council office, 1900 S.E. Milport Road.

Newman said a main agenda item for the April meeting will be money -- what's out there and who's got it. He added that Metro plans to submit another parks and open space bond election in 2006, similar to one Oregon voters approved in 1995.

"Milwaukie can't solve this alone," Newman said.

Milwaukie officials have been frustrated in past attempts to raise money for riverfront development. In 1989 voters rejected a \$12 million downtown and riverfront redevelopment bond. But the city persisted, spending more than \$2.3 million since the mid-1990s to purchase property and demolish buildings along the west side of Southeast McLoughlin Boulevard.

Two remaining buildings -- Vic's Willamette View Tavern and the Milwaukie Antique Mall -- have been acquired by the Oregon Department of Transportation and soon will be demolished for the widening of McLoughlin Boulevard.

Green said he has seen momentum building for the redevelopment of downtown Milwaukie over the past couple of years, over projects such as the North Main Street Village on the old Safeway site. He believes Oregon Solutions' intervention along the riverfront will build on that momentum to revitalize the downtown area.

Although talk of rebuilding the former Jefferson Street boat ramp is not part of the Oregon Solutions effort, Green said he believes there is general consensus among the Riverfront Board members that a new boat ramp and parking lot will become part of the Riverfront Park plan. He said the Oregon Marine Board, which is one of the state agencies Oregon Solutions hopes to tap, provides grant money for such purposes.

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