

Ongoing Debacle or Sea Change?

A couple of months ago the revelations in these pages about the Building 11 settlement raised a few eyebrows, but nothing more. Apparently \$7 million public dollars, much of which the City of Seattle had to pay to settle a lawsuit, isn't enough to warrant much attention. In that case, the a private developer Building 11 LLC had contracted with the City to rebuild and re-purpose an old US Navy building, but a lawsuit ensued as plans became known by the City Council and questioned by many of those involved.

Here's a potentially bigger waste, the Leschi and Lakewood Marinas on Lake Washington. Once again the cash-poor city is looking to hand over the future of an amazing resource to a Request For Proposal (RFP) bid winner. Again, instead of taking ownership of the project the City is counting on a Public Private Partnership (PPP). It may work, but I'd lay my bet on the drive for profit winning handily over public benefit.

When I first wrote about the Leschi debacle back in 2007, docks were falling apart and the culprits and solutions seemed pretty obvious. Leschi had a proud history and was performing a function. Neither the users, nor city nor concessionaire had a whole lot of incentive to spend the money to maintain the marina, so docks were falling apart. While improvements have been made, the situation is still dire at Leschi, and Lakewood has received no significant improvements during that time.

Now, depending on who's talking, Leschi needs at least \$8 million in repairs. Entire docks have been evacuated because they're unsafe, and more are surely to follow if nothing is done. And of course the popular press is presenting it as a "tax dollars going to rich boaters" scenario which is easy to write but basically untrue. Thirty nine to 43% of the revenue from these marinas has been going directly in the city's general fund, and only about \$5-10K comes back to each marina in the form of uplands (shoreside) maintenance.

Yes, Virginia, it's a money maker for the city, not a drain.

Current concessionaire Schober and Associates, which receives the remaining revenue, is supposed to administer and maintain the facilities. But capital improvements were never part of the deal and the docks

are well now past their life expectancy. According to Kurstyn Schober, President of Schober and Associates, trying to get the city to plan capital improvements on a two year budget cycle was impossible.

In other words, there was no incentive for anyone to undertake major maintenance and upgrade projects either. And the moorage customers? Sure, they moan and groan but because of the relatively low prices they didn't want to draw too much attention to the situation.

Leschi

Leschi and Lakewood are similar situations, but let's look at Leschi. There are basically two parts to Leschi, north and south, and they are different situations.

At the very north end there are two basic floating docks (floats) where smallboats, such as centerboard sailboats and kayaks, can be

pulled out of the water. There was a third float, which disintegrated and was replaced with a new dock with finger piers for in-water storage for larger boats. The main access dock was replaced as well, and repairs to the two inner dinghy docks are in evidence. Those docks are still dangerous in places, but some attention has been paid.

The rest of the north end has newer docks that cater to larger boats, up to about 40 feet. These docks are in relatively good shape.

The south end is a completely different story. The far outer dock (and its revenue) has been shut down completely. The two remaining docks and the finger piers are beyond rickety. The outside dock bobs up and down as a display of what's going to happen to the rest of the south end.

There have been injuries, but nobody (so far) has sued. Nobody wants to see these docks go away,

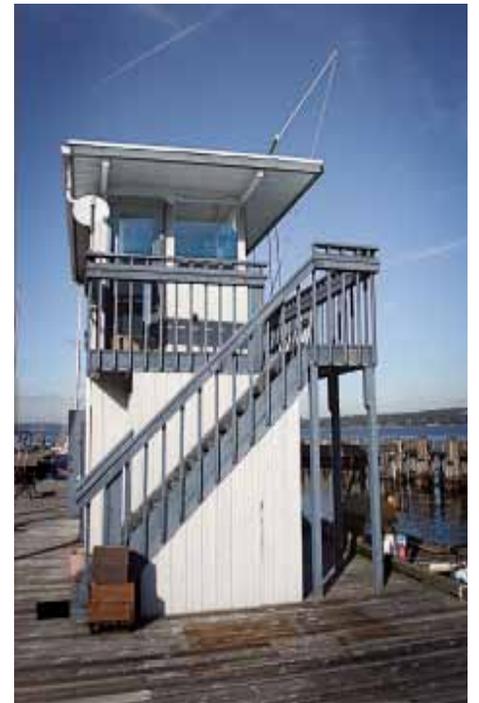
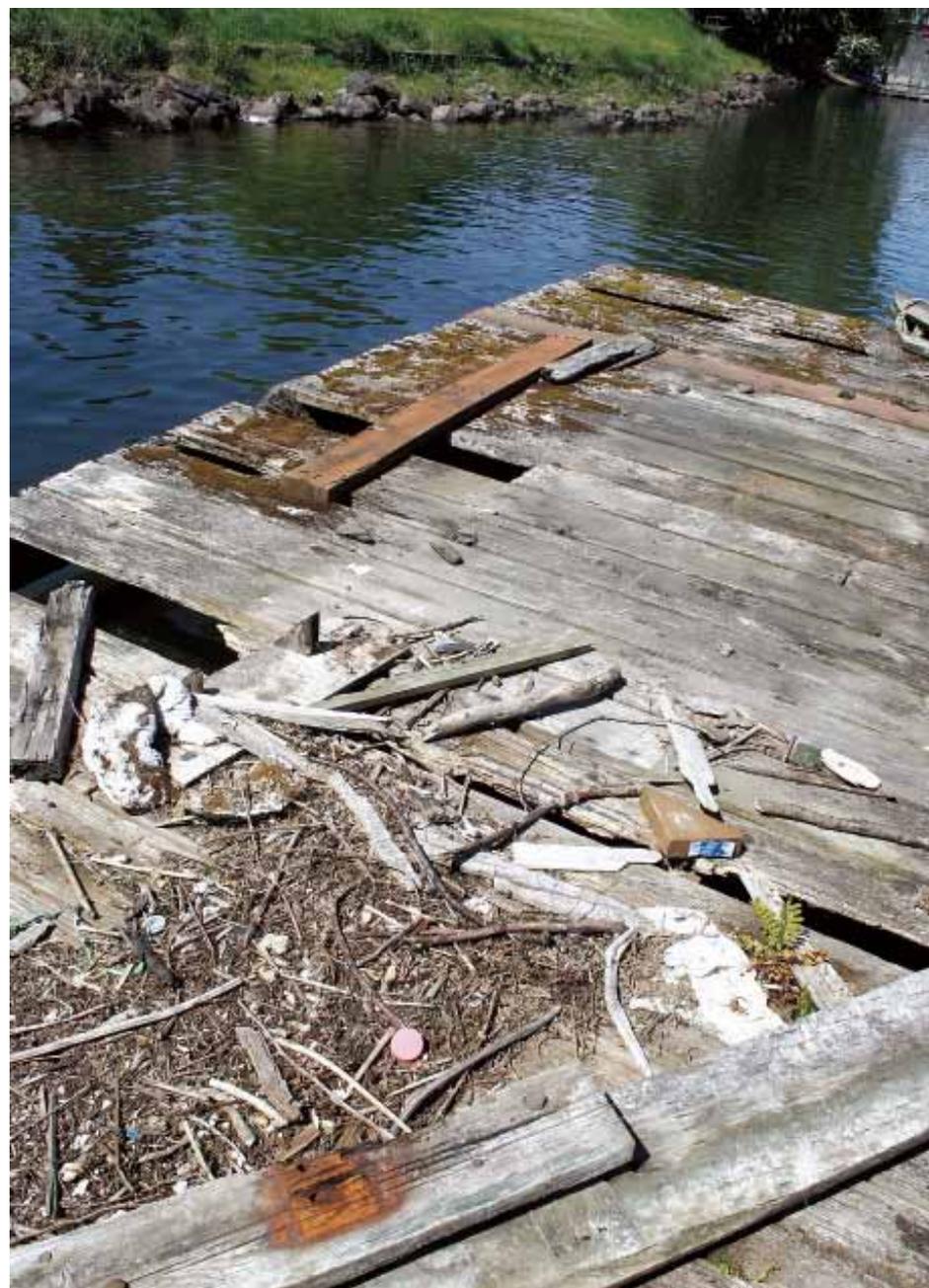


Photo above - The legendary CYC Leschi Race tower which has probably started and finished thousands of races.



not the city, not Schober and Associates and not the tenants. It's just that nobody is going to underwrite the repairs. It's odd that with a projected annual income of over \$1 million and so much of the infrastructure in place it's so difficult to manage these facilities.

Basically, \$2 million was spent on north end of Leschi, the majority of which went to engineering, project management and permitting costs. About \$800K went to building the main dockway and outer docks and miscellaneous repairs before the money dried up. The south end and Lakewood didn't really get any repairs before the money ran out.

At this point it's fair to ask, what about all that economic recovery spending by the Federal government, surely this would be a made-to-order, shovel-ready project? According to Charles Ng of the Seattle Parks Department, federal grants seemed unlikely. Hmmm, were any calls placed to Senators Murray or Cantwell? They've been known to push through a public project or two.

Enter the RFP

Remember how well that RFP for Building 11 worked out for everyone? Let's hope Seattle's RFP for Leschi and Lakewood works out better.

Photo left - The current condition of the docks is absolutely deplorable.

This RFP has only three respondents, one being the existing concessionaire Schober and Associates. The RFP document is available online at <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/partnerships/rfp.htm>. It's clear that the Seattle Parks Department is looking to hand over the future planning, construction and maintenance to the winning bid.

The RFP offered basic guidelines to respondents, but clearly leaves a lot up to the creative minds coming up with the proposals. The guidelines lay out that traditional uses for the Corinthian Yacht Club and Dragon Boat-Club Sake are retained. It also requires that basic repairs be done to keep the marinas open before the big renovation, i.e. the capital improvement.

And for that big renovation, there aren't many specifics, except that the docks have to be built for a 30-year lifespan. And the bidders are keeping their ideas to themselves for the time being. The specifics will come out with the winning bid. What is clear is that Parks wants to review and approve any renovation step by step. But it's not clear what they'd be looking for in those reviews. Bottom line? Benefit to the public?

Kurstyn Schober was at least willing to give a hint about their approach. "Our philosophy is like it has always been, to keep moorage rates affordable for family boaters. A lot of families use these facilities, and we want to keep rates affordable for those boaters."

There are potential political challenges down the line. It's worth noting that the Parks Department, the City Council and the Mayor's office weren't all on quite the same page when it came to Building 11, but that didn't come to the surface until after construction started. Hopefully they are this time. And it might be well worthwhile for the respondents to make sure they're talking to all those facets of Seattle government and politics as well. The official RFP responses will be submitted by June 21st.

Blue Collar Boaters

The most active users of this marina are the fleets that sail out of Corinthian Yacht Club, which has sailed out of Leschi since the 1940s. (Full Disclosure – I've been a CYC member 20+ of those years).

It was CYC members who thought it would be a good idea back in the 1940s to have a sailboat moorage at Leschi, and in fact the Sailboat Moorage sign is still there even though it now is open to sail and power. It was CYC members who built the original floats and ultimately donated them to the city. It was CYC members that ran races using the tower on the end of the dock to mark the start/finish line.

More importantly, the club is still involved. A conservative guess

would be 50 of the 138 spots at Leschi are rented by CYC members, about half of those being of the dry storage variety reserved for centerboard boats that are hauled up by hand. The "wet storage" boats are less than 30' in length. These are older, relatively small boats that cost relatively little to maintain or race. Racers include everything from teachers and artists to doctors and businessmen.

When faced with the disintegrating docks, these boaters didn't pull out overstuffed checkbooks and start writing, they drag out their workbelts and start hammering. At least a half dozen work parties over the last couple of years have kept the floats and docks afloat.

What to Expect

The City of Seattle screwed up in the last 60 years. It cashed checks on a great resource without putting money, or much thought, into its maintenance. And now it doesn't have many good options, so once again it's looking to the almighty PPP to solve the problem.

It may well happen. Maybe the situation is finally clear enough to city officials that they'll oversee the process and ensure that private concerns do right by the potential handed them.

Will the little guy be priced out and the small or humble boats disappear or will the myth that all boaters are rich continue?

Many of these little boats can cost less than taking a family of four to a Seahawks Game at CenturyLink Field. (Talk about discretionary expenses. And talk about questionable use of taxpayer dollars. Don't get me wrong, going to a Hawks game is fun, especially when they're winning. Just sayin' . . .)

To me it's another example of the City of Seattle having no appreciation for its waterfront and boating heritage. Somebody on the city council or in the Parks Department has to stand up and fight for aver-

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Photo above - This photo from 2007 showing the handiwork of volunteers that used to keep the docks in good repair.

age boaters.

At the recent Working Waterfront symposium I saw first hand a spirit of cooperation between different groups. It can work but everyone has to agree about what the objectives are then keeping communicating about those objectives all the way through. The Parks Department doesn't get to hand it off and wait for the money to roll in.

Seattle should have reasonably priced marinas throughout the region, and certainly a facility with floats for small boats. If Lakewood and Leschi are made into high-priced harbors, the City would be losing something more than money. Boating is an essential part of the Pacific

Northwest quality of living from many. It's not just a rich man's sport.

It's too late for good answers. Good answers would have had to come about 30 years ago. Seattle doesn't have the money to pay for the now costly renovations. It could have something to do with settling lawsuits over ill-conceived PPPs. If this PPP is going to work and these marinas are to benefit the public, everybody needs to engage. That includes boaters. *nwy*

Photo below - Leschi's entry into the better docks and gardens competition. Don't even think about tying up out there.

