

A Storied Past

By Andrew Cushman

When the city of Spokane, Wash., initiated plans to renovate its treasured Riverfront Park, the outcry from government, commercial, and public stakeholders reached a fever pitch. With the project almost finished amid resoundingly positive feedback, the city’s Riverfront Park Redevelopment Program Manager, Berry Ellison, describes it as a prime example of effective stakeholder collaboration.



“There was no shortage of interested parties,” says Ellison, PLA, ASLA. “Each group had different priorities, and within those priorities were different levels of commitment. With the importance of this park to people’s lives, it came as no

surprise there would be such intense passion. We needed to harness the passion into positive solutions and compromise.”

This tract of land and water has a rich history dating to the 1800s when pioneers settled here. Fueled by the railroad industry, the city grew with rail yards occupying the site of Riverfront Park. In 1973, Spokane was selected to host the World’s Fair, which led to an intense cleansing and refurbishing of the park’s lands and waters.

The first substantial investment in the park since the World’s Fair was in 2014 via a \$64-million bond referendum, which also resulted in a wave of opinions.

“Everyone wants a say,” Ellison says. “For example, we’re governed by the park board, so all design, development, and maintenance is under the direct authority of the board. Adjacent to the park board is the mayor’s office and city council—two very involved stakeholders. We also had citizen-oversight committees for the design process, which included a Citizens Advisory Board, the Downtown Spokane Partnership, and several others. The city’s Public Works Department needed close coordination due to vital downtown infrastructure and right-of-ways within the park. The park is surrounded by intense commercial and residential development requiring numerous public workshops and informational meetings. Finally, several state and federal authorities required extensive negotiation to gain approval to renovate a park with thousands of feet of shoreline and significant historic resources.”

“With all these entities having a stake in the project, navigating through the approval process was a challenge,” he adds. “But we developed a clear path to design and permit approval, and we stuck to it.”

Getting Started

The 40-acre park’s makeover began with the construction of the first “ice ribbon” skating facility in the Pacific Northwest. Instead of a typical ice rink, an ice ribbon

is an ice trail that features scenic views and fire pits along the way. Next came the replacement of the Howard Street South Channel Bridge and the construction of a new home for the iconic 109-year-old Looff Carrousel. The final stages of the program will include the renovation of the Pavilion Event Center, the creation of a new Howard Street Promenade, and the building of the North Bank Regional Playground.

“One of the keys to success was that we prioritized the stakeholders in order of importance for each aspect we were dealing with,” Ellison says. “Each stakeholder was ranked and tailored depending on the specific decision at hand.”

He explains, “We had extensive individual meetings to protect the cultural and historical resources. These were complex issues, and we had to change the plans several times to meet the requirements. It involved a comprehensive negotiation process, but we fostered a give-and-take relationship. We wanted a partnership where both sides understood what the other wanted to accomplish. We worked with them to make sure we met what they required, which allowed us to receive the approvals.”

The Details

The Ice Ribbon opened first, receiving accolades from patrons and critics alike, and was followed by the opening of the Looff Carrousel and Phase I of the Howard Street Promenade. Most recently, the 40-year-old IMAX Theater was demolished to create space for the new pavilion’s central plaza.

Hill International’s Matt Walker, AIA, CCM, DBIA, who was hired by the city to assist the park’s Program Manager, says, “The Ice Ribbon has been a huge success. They made more money in the first couple of months than they expected for the whole year.”

According to Walker, the \$20-million pavilion project, located in the center of the park, is the crown jewel of the program.

“One of the most interesting elements is called the ‘elevated experience,’” Walker says. “This is a walkway that bridges a number of elevated landings that are suspended 40 feet above the ground and look out across the park and the Spokane River. The pavilion’s cable-net structure will be upgraded with an LED lighting system. The east half of the pavilion floor will consist of a sloping, park-like setting of pathways, terraces, landscaping, and grass areas. Described by the landscape architect as ‘absurd topography,’ it will serve as a central gathering place.”

“I have certainly never had a project like this before,” says Walker, a 30-year industry veteran. “It’s a very unique project. But it’s also a personal project for me because I’ve lived here since the 1990s. This is my home, my city, and I want the best results.”

For more information, contact Berry Ellison, City of Spokane’s Riverfront Park Redevelopment Program Manager, at bellison@spokanecity.org or Matt Walker, Vice President, Hill International, at MatthewWalker@hillintl.com.