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Planners think waterfront has room for both people and baby salmon

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It was one of those stunning spring afternoons at the Seattle waterfront, the Olympics crisp against a rainless horizon, the ferries abuzz on Elliott Bay, the lunch crowd strolling Alaskan Way.

But at Waterfront Park just south of the Seattle Aquarium, the only visitor was a raucous sea gull.

"This place is off the public's radar screen," Seattle parks planner David Graves said. "It's a shame."

Now, though, city planners are getting ready to propose choices that could return two kinds of visitors to Seattle's central waterfront -- people and baby salmon. The two-legged set would come for a nicer waterfront, the fingerlings for a more natural shoreline.

"It really provides an opportunity to work well with the Aquarium," Graves said. "You can take schoolkids out there and say, 'This is what Puget Sound looks like.'"

Faced with rotting pilings below Waterfront Park and nearby city-owned Piers 62 and 63, city parks officials in coming months will outline their vision for a fix to the City Council. It could become part of a larger rethinking of restoring Elliott Bay's shorelines. An inkling of what could be accomplished came to life recently at Olympic Sculpture Park, where a small slice of beach was re-created.

"I would like the whole shoreline to look just like this," said Seattle resident Jay Wellington, who was visiting the new beach on a recent afternoon.

While that sweeping vision is well outside what city planners are talking about, they do hope to create more places where young salmon can hang out in shallow water, feed and bulk up before their trip to sea. Salmon that eat well when they're young are more likely to return and spawn, research shows.

But in Elliott Bay, shorelines where fish can hit the aquatic buffet table have largely been done in by development.

"Urban habitat enhancement is important. ... It's a big opportunity," consultant Paul Schlenger of Anchor Environmental told environmental scientists and others last week at the Puget Sound Georgia Basin Research Conference. "There are also significant constraints."

Looming large on that list, Schlenger said, are the contamination of



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The seawall was removed and a beach was installed on the Seattle waterfront near Myrtle Edwards Park, creating a more fish-friendly shoreline on the heavily industrialized urban waterfront.

mud by years of waterfront industrial activity, and the fact that only a portion of the waterfront is slated for renovation: the area around Piers 62 and 63, where the Summer Nights at the Pier concerts were held just north of the aquarium, and at Waterfront Park to its south.

Despite the obstacles, Schlenger said, "We cannot throw up our hands and say, 'We can't work in this.' We have to make opportunities."

Critics say the city isn't thinking big enough.

Environmentalists and City Councilman Peter Steinbrueck argue that planners are moving too quickly to redevelop areas on either side of the aquarium -- where pier supports are rotting -- without considering the big picture.

"Even though the plans have some good aspects to them, that's one very important piece of the entire waterfront. That's the key central nugget," said Heather Trim of the environmental group People for Puget Sound. "It really needs to be tied into the whole vision. That's really a big concern."

Steinbrueck said would be worth developing a comprehensive waterfront plan before moving ahead with the pier-replacement job, which is expected to cost at least \$30 million.

"This is one of our best opportunities for restoring nearshore marine habitat," Steinbrueck said. "We can give people a sense of ... the tidal action and the experience with the sea."

Ideas the council will review in coming months for Waterfront Park would range up to doing exactly that. Steinbrueck argues the concept should be expanded to the aquarium's north side, eliminating Piers 62 and 63. "Waterfront Park is very small," Steinbrueck said. "It's hard to create a beachlike setting in that area that's meaningful."

As for the Summer Nights concerts, Steinbrueck says they could be held at a reconfigured Colman Dock nearby, where Washington State Ferries already is planning a rebuild. In Steinbrueck's vision, the state would help pay for creating natural shoreline next to the aquarium in order to get federal permission to cover more water in the Colman Dock rebuild.

Environmentalists and scientists point out that local governments are under the gun to boost the number of endangered salmon on the nearby Duwamish River. If that works, it will mean more baby salmon -- hungry baby salmon -- coming to Elliott Bay in years to come.

"We can no longer turn our backs on the highly urbanized areas," said Trim, the activist. "It's important to get some natural or created artificial habitat."

One problem with creating a sandy beach, is that it won't be naturally replenished by sand washing downhill, as in natural areas. The more ambitious the restoration project, the more work it would take to keep up.

Waiting longer while a big waterfront vision is articulated would push back the pier-replacement project, which already is expected to last until about 2012, Graves said. Already all major uses of the piers have been discontinued, and a city report said nearly three-fifths of the pilings under Piers 62 and



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The Seattle waterfront, as seen from the Bainbridge Island ferry.

63 are moderately to severely damaged, with many having less than a quarter of their width intact.

"The sense of urgency is the condition of the piers," Graves said. "There is a point in the not-too-distant future where we will have to close the piers to foot traffic."

In the background of the whole discussion is Seattle's seemingly never-ending quandary about replacing the earthquake-rattled Alaskan Way Viaduct, just across the street from the waterfront.

Graves says it's really a separate discussion from the waterfront. Nothing the city staff envisions would knock down the sea wall. But Steinbrueck says with some extra state money, partial sea wall removal could be part of the deal.

Currently, Waterfront Park is partially swallowed by a complex of construction trailers and fences because of an ongoing renovation of the aquarium next door. But it has sat vastly underused for decades. Junkies have historically hung out there, alongside concrete columns and stairs that look vaguely like a modern Stonehenge.

It seemed like a good idea when it was built in the 1970s. But it just didn't work. Graves is convinced the city can do better.

"Let's do what we can, given that we're on a working waterfront," Graves said. "Let's do something great out here."

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