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City soon will be swamped by new ideas

Environmentalists like to point out that they often get the last laugh. Paul Fishman likes to say he's above all that.

His office is upstairs from Old Town's leading comedy club... you guessed it... The Last Laugh.

This vantage gives Fishman a clear view of one of the most exciting — and most challenging — developments on the downtown horizon: the project about to be unveiled for the 31 empty acres near Union Station.

A task force appointed by the Portland Development Commission is about to announce its intentions for the area. The group hopes to steer a commitment through the City Council by May.

Fishman hopes the document — years in the making — is not yet cast in stone.

An ecologist whose firm does major consulting on issues of natural resource management, Fishman has been doing lots of work of late on wetlands.

Wetlands — not concrete canyons — are exactly what he'd like to see from his office window.

Preliminary plans for the area — dubbed by boosters "North Downtown" — feature some mix of office and residential buildings, with some sort of so-called "public attractor" — a museum, an aquarium, a statue of Will Vinson — thrown in for good measure.

Bob Naito has suggested opening a rail museum at Union Station — the city already owns a fleet of historic trains — and linking it to a maritime museum located on the adjacent waterfront.

One way or another, all of this will involve a lot of concrete. And that means that good old Rose City rain once again will have nowhere to go but down the drain.

Fishman thinks it's time we got smart. The city, he says, through its Bureau of Environmental Services, already is engaged in rethinking the way it handles stormwater in developed areas.

Historically, stormwater — what you and I call rain — has been collected from roofs, streets, parking lots, then routed directly to the nearest body of water, usually ending up being dumped directly into the Willamette River.

En route, the rain picks up a Pandora's box of pollutants. Contaminants range from regular old oil and grease to dust from brake linings thick with heavy metal. All this junk runs into our river.

Environmentalists are responding by trying out new technologies, designing stormwater systems that treat the runoff before it enters the river. And the key tools of their trade are natural ones — ponds, swales and marshes.

In these engineered wetlands, Fishman explains, bio-filtration can clean the water, which then goes through a marsh or grassland swale for what he calls "a final polishing."

And the area around Union Station, he says, could provide a perfect example of how this technology could work in an urban environment.

This image of a downtown development dotted with pint-sized ponds and marshes brings to mind the image of ducks nesting in the doorways of domiciles, of great blue herons snacking in the shadows of shops... and that brings to mind the image of Mike Houck.

Portland's urban naturalist thinks Fishman is a man whose time should come soon. As soon as the report from the Union Station Task Force.

Quicker than even you can say micro-organic biotechnology, Houck can produce pictures of urban renewal projects in London where tiny wetland areas set aside for native plants became havens for wildlife and citizens alike.

Understand, please, Fishman and Houck are not talking about taking 31 prime urban acres and trying to replicate Bybee Lake. They just think pockets of natural vegetation — rather than planters of bark dust — should be part of the urban mix.

Houck also thinks that art should be incorporated into these areas, with environmental sculptures serving as portals to the pristine. (He likes the 1 percent for art program so much he thinks it's time for 1 percent for the environment.)

And, lest you conjure up images of a north transit mall milling with millions of mosquitoes, Fishman says there'd be fish in the wetlands to eat them. And those that escape? They'd be nabbed by the swallows flying from the nesting boxes built on every telephone pole.

The bottom line: The Willamette River is the reason that our city grew here. As downtown continues growing, north across the great divide of Burnside, we should remember to respect that river, and give it a place in our planning.

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Coalition disagrees on Metro council

By DOUG BROWNING
Of the Argus

A coalition of suburban local governments was unable to agree Wednesday on how many people should serve on the Metropolitan Service District Council, who should elect them and whether they should work full-time or part-time.

The Regional Governance Committee was asked to endorse a proposal calling for a seven-member council, whose members would be elected and be paid full-time salaries. (Present Metro councilors work part-time without pay).

Washington County opposed the proposal. Its RGC representative, Dennis Mulvihill, said the county doesn't think now is the time to be suggesting that voters approve more full-time officials.

Other members argued that councilors should continue to serve part-time without pay. Others agreed they should be part-time but said they should be paid so qualified people will be interested in serving.

After it became apparent that the committee would be unable to reach a consensus, it sent the proposal back to a subcommittee for more work.

The size of the Metro Council is one of many issues being deliberated by the Metro Charter Committee, appointed by the Legislature to draft a document that would establish Metro's duties and responsibilities and powers.

The charter process grew out of arguments that the region's voters ought to be able to decide for themselves what kind of regional

government they want.

A charter is similar to a constitution. It has to be approved by voters and can be changed only by the same voters. Metro's current duties, etc. were set by the Legislature and can be changed by the Legislature.

The charter committee has been meeting weekly for months and plans to release a rough-draft of a charter for discussion soon. A revised version will be presented to the region's voters in November.

Local governments created the Regional Governance Committee (RGC) so they could present a united voice to the charter committee.

The RGC has more than 30 members, including Washington and Clackamas counties plus numerous cities and special districts, such as

water and fire providers.

Portland and Multnomah County aren't members, though a Portland representative usually attends meetings.

The RGC and the charter committee have been in close contact and will hold a joint meeting in Portland Saturday, Jan. 18.

One motivating force behind the creation of a process to better define Metro's duties is the growing realization that managing the area's rapid population growth requires more cooperation between local governments.

Metro, as the only regionwide governing body, is considered to be the most logical candidate to coordinate such cooperation.

Metro already coordinates

regional transportation and solid waste disposal planning and will soon propose, with local government backing, a regional program to preserve natural areas.

But the question of what other powers, if any, it should have is a major source of disagreements among officials.

Local governments say Metro shouldn't provide services directly. They say most residents prefer that someone nearby be accountable for government services, not a "distant" regional body.

In part, they created the RGC to make sure that the charter committee doesn't get carried away and assign to Metro many responsibilities they feel belong to local governments.