

Willamette Falls

◦ LEGACY PROJECT ◦

Frequently Asked Questions (May 2017)

What is the Willamette Falls Legacy Project?

After the Blue Heron paper mill closed in 2011, four government partners - Oregon City, Clackamas County, Metro and the State of Oregon - came together as the Willamette Falls Legacy Project to secure public access to Willamette Falls, which had been hidden behind the growth of industry in Oregon City for more than 150 years.

How long will it take to build the riverwalk?

A riverwalk is currently being designed with community input, and a final design will be revealed in June 2017. The next major step is finalizing construction drawings and land use approvals, leading up to groundbreaking in 2018 and the completion of phase one by 2022.

The project is a long-term public partnership, and as such, requires significant time and engagement to create what will be a signature public space for the local community, the region and the state.

How much will the riverwalk cost?

The full riverwalk is planned as a \$60 million project, including design, engineering and construction. With \$25 million of initial funding in hand, we have made significant progress in designing the riverwalk and planning for initial construction. The riverwalk is expected to be a catalyst, attracting private investment and spurring a full redevelopment of the property, a process that is likely to take decades.

How did the project partners choose the riverwalk's design?

The design for the riverwalk is the culmination of a rigorous creative process led by Snøhetta, which was guided by the project's four core values and influenced by their discoveries of the site's complexities and opportunities. The design process involved the participation of thousands of enthusiastic people across the state of Oregon whose input has shaped the design. Other factors such as technical feasibility and cost were also considered.

Now that the riverwalk has been designed, how can people continue to be involved?

While the unveiling of riverwalk design means that no further design feedback will be sought from the community, there will be various opportunities to stay involved with the project. For example, as specific aspects of the riverwalk are planned for (e.g. transportation, interpretive design), public meetings will be held to seek community input. The non-profit friends group, Rediscover the Falls, is always welcoming new members who are interested in helping to support the riverwalk through a variety of community events and activities.

Who owns the project site?

The site is privately owned. Falls Legacy LLC purchased the 22-acre former Blue Heron mill property in 2014 and Portland General Electric (PGE) owns the dam on the site. Project Partners were granted an easement from Falls Legacy LLC to construct the riverwalk on its property and PGE has granted the project partners an easement option.

What's happening with private development?

While the site's private owner is working on redevelopment plans for the overall 22-acre site, the pace of our public riverwalk project is moving faster. The riverwalk will likely be the first improvement to the Willamette Falls site, and we expect it to stimulate private development, bringing people and jobs back to Oregon City.

While the Willamette Falls Legacy Project's vision is for riverwalk development and private development to proceed together and be fully integrated, we also believe that connecting people with Willamette Falls is important enough to the community to move forward with the riverwalk on its own.

Why aren't public entities purchasing the property?

Early in the process, the four Willamette Falls Legacy Project partners (Oregon City, Metro, Clackamas County and the State of Oregon) chose not to purchase the site due to the risks associated with public ownership – such as the costs of securing the site and high redevelopment costs. The current owner, Falls Legacy LLC, purchased the site out of bankruptcy in 2014 and was prepared to take on bigger risks than the public sector.

Our project team is working closely with Falls Legacy LLC, which has granted a no-cost easement to the project to allow for riverwalk construction as well as contributing \$200,000 toward riverwalk design. Falls Legacy has also generously committed to funding a portion of future operations and maintenance costs for the riverwalk.

How will the project accommodate the community's desire for river access?

We have heard loud and clear from the community that river access is important, and while direct river access may not be included in the first phase of riverwalk construction, various options are being considered, such as portage trails to the river and water trail connections, to create opportunities for kayaking and other water activities.

How is the project seeking to collaborate with Native American tribes?

Willamette Falls has been a special part of Native American cultural history since time immemorial, playing an important role in trade, fishing, hunting and gathering of native plants. Native people from across the region visited and lived near the falls and continue to do so today. As part of the project's design and interpretive efforts, the project team is involved in outreach to: the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde; Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon; Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation; Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs; and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. The project team is working to identify ways to tell the story about tribal use and rights to the falls in ways that are appropriate, respectful and relevant. Factors that are being considered include historic uses, treaty obligations and the desire for ongoing protection of the area's natural and cultural resources.

What happened to the proposal for a whitewater park?

In September 2016, the Willamette Falls Legacy Project partners group decided unanimously to move forward on its public riverwalk as originally planned, without further consideration of a proposal to integrate a whitewater park into the project. The whitewater park proposal had been brought forward by nonprofit We Love Clean Rivers, which envisioned the construction of a large-scale manmade whitewater channel through the project site. In making its decision, the partners group took into consideration its essential goal of ensuring public access to Willamette Falls and the desire to avoid additional costs and delays to the riverwalk.

Will the mill buildings be demolished?

There are over 50 buildings on site, and five buildings have been selected to be reused in redevelopment through the adopted framework plan. The remaining buildings may either be demolished or retained for future use, but before any demolition can occur, hazardous substances such as asbestos need to be addressed. The Partners are currently working with the site owner and have obtained state and federal grants to begin the remediation process for hazardous materials.

How can I access the falls today?

There is no public access to the falls from the site at this time. Information about limited site tours can be found at www.rediscoverthefalls.com. There is a Willamette Falls viewpoint along Highway 99E in Oregon City and another viewpoint on I-205 northbound. Pedestrians can view the falls along McLoughlin Promenade in Oregon City, and from the Museum of the Oregon Territory. People on watercraft can view the falls from downstream in the Willamette River.