

How did beach restoration alter White Rock?

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As residents of Birch Bay grapple with a beach restoration project, the experiences of other communities that have gone through similar changes in the past can be of help.

Just across the border, White Rock features a restored beach and a tree-lined promenade popular for afternoon strolls, but it wasn't always that way. The restoration of the beach and construction of the promenade was a decades-long process that occurred in stages.

Although White Rock has its own city government and has a wider buffer between the road and the waterfront than Birch Bay does, a few key similarities make White Rock an interesting case study for the Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility project. The geography and ecology of the two beaches are similar: both are broad, shallow tidal flats on semi-circular bays. Also, White Rock was a smaller town with a population of around 12,500 when the shoreline enhancements began in the late '70s.

Jackie Hollett was a resident and a member of the White Rock Chamber of Commerce at the time. She said she remembers taking her children to the beach for picnics before the shoreline was overhauled.

"You had to walk across gravel parking lots, through blackberry bushes and around boulders to get down there," she said. "You would look left, look right and see maybe two other families on the beach, even on a nice day."

After years of discussion and planning, White Rock's waterside restoration efforts began in 1979. Hugh Ellenwood, archives manager for White Rock Museum and Archives, said the process completely overhauled a neglected area.

"At the time, the waterfront was seen as the run down part of town. It was pretty industrial looking with the railroad cutting through it, gravel parking lots and bushes all over," he said. "For about a decade, there were constant improvement projects to clean it up."

The construction process wasn't very disruptive to local homes and businesses because it was done in stages. Over time, crews removed shrubs, bushes and large boulders; graded the berm below the railroad tracks; installed parking lots and later built the promenade with walkways, benches, lights and other infrastructure. The road was never shut down longer than the time it took to bring in heavy equipment, because construction occurred mostly on the other side of the tracks and there was plenty of room. Nevertheless, the project roused its share of local contention when it was first proposed.

"The issue divided people in the '70s because about half the people thought it would be a good thing and the other half thought it would be bad," Ellenwood said. "Most of the people against it were naturalists who wanted to keep the shrubs and bushes in place and young people who liked to have fires down on the beach."

City alderman Tom Kirstein was a major force behind revitalization efforts. He ran for mayor in 1989 with the campaign slogan, "Let's Move Downhill," because at the time the city center was inland, and he wanted economic prosperity to extend to the shoreline. He won by a landslide.

"Kirstein really pushed to build the promenade. It was built in three stages from the late '80s to the early-to mid-'90s," Ellenwood said. "Since that time, White Rock has changed in sheer numbers because the whole region has grown, but there's no question the beach restoration played a major role in putting White Rock on the map as a destination for Vancouverites."

It wasn't just the beach restoration that put White Rock on Vancouver's radar. Before he was mayor, Kirstein was an accountant who teamed up with local architect Chip Barrett to promote a sandcastle

contest. From a modest first year with 12 entries, the White Rock Canadian Open Sandcastle Competition, as it was known, grew to attract a crowd of 150,000 people at its height in 1985. It was shut down the next year due to crowd security issues, but Ellenwood said the contest lives on in the memory of White Rock residents who were around at the time.

In the late '70s, White Rock embarked on a campaign to strengthen its image as a beachside destination. Hollett was on the chamber of commerce when the city passed ordinances requiring beachfront businesses to have awnings and paint their exteriors.

"It was a concerted effort with a lot of cooperation between city council and residents to create an image and boost tourism," she recalled.

Today, White Rock is a bustling city of just under 20,000 residents, and the mile-long beach is rarely deserted. Paul Flack is the city's operations manager. He manages the parks, including the promenade and beach.

"It's a very popular place to walk and jog. A lot of people use it as a fitness track, and it's easy to access the beach and the pier," he said. Stairs and ramps lead down from the railroad grade to brick- and asphalt-paved walkways, making the promenade accessible for all. Underground water and electrical lines provide lighting and fire protection, even out on the pier.

Maintaining the waterside park is straightforward, according to Flack.

"It's very manageable," he said. "There has been some erosion, and we did some dredging. We've done some environmental compensation right along the frontage, with little pockets of eelgrass and other species to promote crustaceans and replace what's damaged and killed. All in all it hasn't been a problem."

The railroad company Burlington National Santa Fe (BNSF) owns much of the land on which the promenade was built.

"We have to get their approval if we want to do anything," Flack said. "They've been generally supportive of anything we want to do."

Paid parking along the waterfront helps the city cover the cost of renting the land from BNSF.

Flack said there is still debate about how the beach's ecology should be managed.

"Some people like it wild, some people like it more manicured," Flack said. "We try to plant native species down by the shoreline and keep it more natural, but it's sometimes a balancing act.

"People love to walk down there, and it's a major boon to the businesses along the water. I don't think anyone who lives here now would go back.

"It's a more upscale place now than it was back in the '60s and '70s, and property values have gone up," he said.

The Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility Project may cause similar changes in Birch Bay.

"That's another – some people would say not necessarily great – outcome, but it's an inevitable outcome," said John Gargett, former president of the Birch Bay Chamber of Commerce.