

## Su Dowie

*TWA members and others are talking to writer Sharon Babcock about enduring inspirations, life lessons, and perspectives from their experiences on the working waterfront.*

*This month's feature: **Su Dowie**, the executive director of the Foss Waterway Development Authority.*



Su Dowie is a tireless supporter of the waterfront and her retirement in May from the Foss Waterway Development Authority will mark the end of her very productive 16 years with FWDA.

FWDA is an organization focused on the Foss Waterway and is reminiscent of the area's role in Tacoma more than 120 years ago. Marine trade, railroads and sawmills made the Foss Waterway an industrial center. Its namesake, Thea Foss, started the Foss Maritime Company in 1889. Over time, industrial use polluted the waterway and the economy shifted as businesses closed or moved away. Things got so bad that the Environmental Protection Agency designated the waterway and Commencement Bay a Superfund cleanup site in 1983.

That designation was a call to action for city officials and business leaders and resulted in the creation of the Foss Waterway Development Authority to steer the waterfront back to success. Since then, the organization's efforts have been involved in planning, engineering and other development activities in cooperation with regulatory agencies and with public input. Today the mixed-use community on the Thea Foss Waterway includes housing, retail and restaurants as well as recreation and education opportunities.

As she retires, Su Dowie expresses her unique perspective on this transformation.

### **Q: How would you describe the role your work demands?**

A: Mine is the role of an implementer; the planning is done by the city and community. I help to bridge the gap between vision and reality. The hats involved for me have been those of developer, public agency employee, community member, environmentally aware citizen, and booster.

### **Q: What did you have to learn to do this?**

A: The regulatory requirements of this environment, patience, how to best do advocacy for the community, permitting, and a balance between technical knowledge and policy.

### **Q: What have you most enjoyed during your tenure? Why?**

A: Working with the city and parks and the quality of personnel; they are bright. Also, the business people who advocate for progress in this vein. Often they are not acknowledged, however they identify resources for the projects we plan.

**Q: What are the problems solved by someone who does what you do?**

A: We often take blighted vacant land and bring to it mixed urban uses that will suit the next 100 years.

**Q: What are the inherent challenges in this work?**

A: Trying to get public infrastructure, utilities for example, upgraded to support coming development. Another is what is happening in the market window. This is constantly shifting. It affects the lending community. If it comes together, then there is a great environment for development.

**Q: How do you juggle action and restraint?**

A: We, one, avoid discouragement, two, figure out ways to get things done and three, encourage others who share our vision to advocate. An example of this is the implementation of the recent installation of the Tacoma seaplane float where those who owned boats stuck their necks out to make it happen.

**Q: Is more development always better? When isn't it?**

A: This depends on what kind of community you want. Retail follows money. Density in a core (in my view, downtown) is the way you get more performing arts and retail. What will follow is higher incomes, education, and housing.

**Q: What, if any, circumstances call for taking a tough stance in order to get things done?**

A: People fear change. If there is to be forward movement, people have to be adaptive and willing to change, to embrace an idea as opposed to fearing it.

**Q: In your view, what are the most critical needs of Commencement Bay now?**

A: An engaged community that has a passion for its future. An informed public that challenges the sustainability of projects, asking "how is this going to be maintained over time with operations and maintenance?"

**Q: Is there a moment you can recall that changed your outlook on what you do?**

A: Yes. I was 19 years old and watching *All in the Family* on television. Meathead and Archie were arguing about the best way to put on socks and shoes—left sock, right sock and then left shoe right shoe OR left sock, left shoe followed by right sock, right shoe. This was an epiphany for me. I learned that it doesn't matter how you get there and that when you are in the public sector with all its process, you need to be flexible.

**Q: Which people have most influenced you in this work?**

A: George Weyerhaeuser Jr. and Don Meyer for their intelligent perspective, soft leadership, negotiating skills, a people perspective, and an ability to clearly express themselves.

**Q: What have been the milestones in your time at the Foss Waterway Development Authority?**

A: Saving what is now the Seaport Museum building by securing seven state and federal funding sources, propping it up before it fell into the bay, and creating a new wharf for it. Also getting the marinas completed along the Foss. Soon to be announced are projects developing parks and the development of vacant lots.

**Q: What are the changes on Commencement Bay that you imagine happening?**

A: I envision a much denser population, not spread around all neighborhoods but focused on the downtown core and then developing outward after it succeeds. I see us using our waterways as in the past to commute, with fast boats that do not create damaging wakes. I see a stronger school system and human beings freed by technology to do more creative things, living their lives in changed ways.