

Q & A WITH LOREN COHEN

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 is the 14th installment in the series: Loren Cohen, manager of Legal Affairs for Point Ruston and former TWA board president.



On a recent warm summer evening, Loren Cohen and his wife walked along the Waterwalk, a nearly mile-long esplanade at the Point Ruston development that connects the Ruston Way promenade with Point Defiance Park. Also on this scenic path were young adults holding hands, skateboarders, and a wide variety of people spilling into what Cohen calls Tacoma's backyard.

"It's weird about the water," Cohen said. "It has a certain intangible magnetism. You can see a representation of the diversity of Tacoma on Ruston Way."

As part of the father-son MC Construction Consultants company, Cohen and his father, Mike, have changed the former Point Ruston superfund site into one of Tacoma's premier destinations. The Copperline Apartments, which opened last year, are at full capacity: the first phase of 21 water-view condominiums is sold out; 16 of the 22 units in phase two are sold out; and construction has begun on phase three. Residents -- arriving from a broad geographical area -- are already moving into the first two levels of the initial condo building.

Q: Where did the ideas come from for this project?

A: We always look at developments when we are travelling. And we study. In this case, probably 20 existing projects in other communities. We were inspired by Santana Row in San Jose, the San Antonio Water Walk, and The Grove and Americana in Los Angeles.

Q: What has been the most challenging part of the project?

A: Anyone involved in real estate knows the level of unknowns that is a normal part of the work. In this case, because of the superfund remediation on the site, that made it more complex. It meant employing lobbyists and interfacing with governmental agencies in ways we had not previously experienced. The Departments of Ecology and Natural Resources have been involved. The slow but thorough Environmental Protection Agency has been involved. The Waterwalk encircles the entire site bringing public presence, interest and scrutiny. We have also worked with the cities of Tacoma and Ruston, Point Defiance Park, and the merchants of Ruston

Way to make this happen.

Q: What are you proudest of?

A: The public/private partnerships, the integration of the public into the project, and the access the public now has to a site that had never been accessible.

Q: At what stage is the superfund site remediation?

A: In its final stages after 30 years. The roads and sidewalks are being done to achieve final capping of the remedial work. The Point Ruston mixed use project with its plans for retail, restaurants, and a theater will very likely take us another eight years to complete.

Q: What have you learned?

A: How to interface with the community in order to meet its expectations. We try to be directly active in the community to stay in touch with this, through outreach and community events we host here. In August we'll be hosting soon-to-be-released Army troops at an event to assist with their assimilation into the workforce.

Q: How do you respond to those who want no future development of any kind on the shores of Commencement Bay?

A: I believe there is always a tension between existing industrial operations and potential uses. This is an ongoing discussion this community will grapple with forever. The city elders will need to continue wrestling with this. Protecting the Port of Tacoma is very important. We don't see them pushing to erect cranes on Schuster Parkway. Mixed use developers are not fighting to put buildings on the Hylebos Waterway. In Tacoma, the waterways are set up to help make the distinction.

Q: What is the most fun for you?

A: Working with our team. Our company has been a stable of folks who have known my father for 30 years. They have seen me as a toddler. I not only get to work with them now but I get to help hire others to add to our expertise. It brings creative surprises, (for example) one of our staff members affixed a camera to a drone, taking photos that give us an entirely new perspective on this site.