

Q & A WITH KURT FREMONT

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: **Kurt Fremont**, president of the Puyallup River Watershed Council and senior environmental specialist for the City of Tacoma.*



Kurt Fremont wears two hats.

As president of the volunteer non-profit board of the Puyallup River Watershed Council, he leads a group of citizens, businesses, governments and others to help achieve clean water, healthy habitat, and thriving communities within the Puyallup River watershed. The Puyallup River watershed stretches from the top of Mount Rainier on the east to the town of Pacific on the north to the Nisqually River watershed on the south to Commencement Bay on the west.

As senior environmental specialist for the City of Tacoma, he works to ensure that Commencement Bay is not damaged by storm water or wastewater from either industrial or residential customers. He and colleagues inspect the accuracy of pollution prevention devices and respond to spills and complaints. They issue permits and ask “where will this water eventually go” in instances such as the recent flooding of the Stadium Bowl.

Q: What is distinctive about the Puyallup River Watershed council?

A: These individuals--who come from the Port of Tacoma, Pierce Conservation District, University of Puget Sound, the Tacoma Pierce County Health Department, Citizens for a Healthy Bay, the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Puyallup Historical Hatchery Foundation, the citizenry--have experience. They come together to minimize the impact of water quality and habitat as well as agriculture and green space. The value of the group comes from the quality of the people at the table. They are knowledgeable, professional, and engaged.

Q: Why do they care about the watershed?

A: They know how much damage can be done in a small amount of time.

Q: How does the group balance action with restraint on issues related to the watershed?

A: My role is to ensure that people feel heard and that they communicate openly with each other. At our table they feel respected by the other members even though they may have contentious relationships in other circumstances. Action finds its way.

Q: What is the most urgent issue for the group?

A: Clearly it is educating the public about the sectors involved in meeting the priority needs of the watershed. The socio-economic realities in the watershed are visibly changing.

Q: Is less growth always better for the watershed?

A: Not necessarily. The area was more damaged environmentally during the 1930s when there were far fewer people. Growth is going to happen. If it is managed expertly, more people can enjoy the resources. There is a breaking point, however, and I don't know where that is.

Q: What is the most personally interesting thing that has occurred since you joined the council?

A: Attending a workshop (hosted) by the Russell Family Foundation that I was fortunate to be able to participate in. There I learned a lot about facilitation. It was eye-opening to see the type of passion brought to the training by young people.

Q: What most inspires you?

A: That our members keep coming back and that they exhibit genuine and honest energy and motivation for the work.

Q: What are the risks and payoffs of collaboration?

A: It is always a risk that stakeholders could disengage if the time is not spent well. The payoff is the collaborative approach to issues. As a recent example, we experienced some confusion about the dangers associated with the proposed methanol plant on the tide flats. A member volunteered to bring in an expert to update us with more detailed information. When he did that, we learned that there may be a carbon offset to the dangers. The payoff was observing that people listened and that they not only received more accurate information but also had a contact person we could reach out to individually or collectively going forward.

Q: Are you concerned about an increased number of fossil fuel trains operating on the Puyallup River Watershed environs?

A: I'm a believer in how supply and demand affects these questions. There are risks associated to this, yes. Is it possible to do this safely as the demand increases? Yes. Our dependence on the automobile has had the biggest negative impact on bodies of water like the river and the bay. We have not yet figured out how to put highway and road runoff through a treatment system. Thirty years from now, we'll look back and then be able to identify the impact of fossil fuel transport.