

Q & A WITH ROBERT THOMS

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 13th installment in the series: Robert Thoms, Tacoma City Councilman for District 2 which encompasses Commencement Bay.



In his address to a recent TWA meeting, Robert Thoms' mantra was, "Be brief, be brilliant, and be gone." He routinely asks how government can either enhance what the private sector is doing or get out of its way, and how government can be a good partner to help us understand what our core competencies are so that we can do more. He views Tacoma's waterfront as the largest part of the quality of life equation and the reason most people who live here are here.

Thoms, appointed to the city council in 2012 and elected last November, also considers Tacoma's waterfront the most underdeveloped in the state; vibrant yet not functioning on all cylinders. "We're going to grow, the waterfront is going to be utilized, and Tacoma has not thought much about that. It will take thinking long-term and changing our horizon line from the kitchen table ... to a broader vision."

Q: What is most on your mind these days?

A: Related to the waterfront, right now it is to help clarify the size of the buffer zone for watercraft that will be approaching the 115th U.S. Open Championship Golf Tournament at Chambers Bay (next year). (It's) how Tacoma best prepares for visitors who will pass through town or use its services and amenities on their way to University Place for that event. When our region goes global for this event, can vessels anchor close to shore or perhaps tie to a temporary log boom?

Unrelated to the tournament, I think about how we best create amenities that serve our own people first and the large and small businesses that are here, about not settling for less than our citizens deserve in water access, family friendly spaces, and food—amenities that put people at ease. People have a pride and recognize that they are fortunate to live in this place because of the water. Extending that to first-time visitors is critical. I need to know what types of challenges citizens and business are running into and how our regulatory structures help or hinder that, for example what it takes to set up a sidewalk café. Legislation either fixes or harms something. In a healthy regulatory environment, we need a good balance. It is important that government is aware of ripple effects and that we create a regulatory environment that sends a

clear message that we're open for business here, that we are agile and not stodgy.

Q: What are the issues?

A: Just because Tacoma is not the event host for the golf tournament, we still need answers to things like determining the watercraft buffer zone, parking, signage, and making sure businesses know what to expect. I see the event as a way to assess where the community was in 2013 when planning began and where we want to be in 2015. We have a better understanding now than before that this involves larger aspirations that will benefit the region much after the tournament is over—beautification of streets, way-finding signs, busing, pothole fixes, an incorporation of the Downtown Merchants Group into what is happening at Chambers Bay. It is a great test to see if we can put it all together by a fixed date and track what difference it makes to businesses. If we do it right, it won't be the last time we'll attract a major event.

Q: How did you come to your attraction to the waterfront?

A: I was an active duty Navy officer for five years and currently serve as a Navy reservist, reporting for duty once a month. Currently we are doing an exercise called RIMPAC, with 20 nations participating to practice interoperability between Pacific Rim armed forces as a means of promoting stability in the region to the benefit of all participating nations, including the Chinese for the first time. It is the largest maritime exercise in the world and is described by the Navy as a training opportunity that helps participants foster and sustain the cooperative relationships that are critical to ensuring the safety of sea lanes and security on the world's oceans. The Navy has made an invaluable investment in me. Now I'm investing in them through public service. My experiences have taught me that leadership is earned. You either sit quietly and let someone else lead, or you step up and do it yourself.