

## Beyond Urban Branding

*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 tenth installment in the series: a selection of comments from the recent forum “Beyond Urban Branding: The Promise, the Problem, the Potential” sponsored by the University of Washington Tacoma.*



More than 300 people, including TWA members and a city-image experts from around the country, convened at the University of Washington Tacoma Feb. 20 for the fifth annual Urban Studies Forum. Titled “Beyond Urban Branding: the Problem, the Promise, the Potential,” the forum was intended to start a regional rebranding conversation.

During the day of presentations and panel discussions, attendees heard about regions that have gained national awareness and enhanced their reputations through focused attention on a fundamental “story” that underlies their regional strengths and distinctiveness. The forum was the first step in an emerging community effort, facilitated by UW Tacoma, to advance a new and authentic “story” of the South Sound region, one meant to capitalize on the phenomenal transformations of the past 15 years. Revived neighborhoods, an entrepreneurial spirit and unrivaled community pride—combined with a world-class natural setting—afford a compelling opportunity to reframe the South Sound brand.

The first order of business was to survey the group about what words came to mind when thinking of Tacoma. The resulting words are represented in the image above, with “waterfront,” “beauty,” “gritty,” and “potential” being the most selected descriptors.

What follows is a selection of questions, comments, and observations from presenters and attendees:

**Stan Selden (forum sponsor and TWA member):** “My family has been here for 130 years. We know the South Sound is a great place, but we’ve got to get the word out. We suffer from a second-city syndrome.”

**Fern Tiger (professor, UW Tacoma Urban Studies):** “Urban branding is about a process, not a product. It’s a process that involves all sectors within the region in a practical and meaningful way—a process that eventually uncovers an authentic vision.”

**Ali Modarres (director, UW Tacoma Urban Studies):** “The DNA of this region is industrial, that’s what makes it post-industrial. In the process of branding, copying is not the way to go. It’s the creation of a narrative. Identity must follow this process, too. The summary is complex -- we

cannot create a new identity while ignoring history. Also, how do we include all voices in the brand DNA?"

**Lyle Quasim (local civic leader):** "In our community, we haven't come to grips with income inequality and inclusion in the process. The advent of the 12th Man honking at each other with the Seahawks' run to the Super Bowl was a disruptive event that helped to identify what we are and who we are as a region."

**Laurie Rose:** "It is the voices of the numbers that make the story Tacoma. Help that story be told."

**Pam Glaser (Chattanooga (Tenn.) Planning Agency):** "The best way to predict the future is to invent it ... Downtowns reflect the greatness of their citizens. Chattanooga once had a Union Station too, but they tore it down in the 1970s."

**Bill McGraw (reporter with The Detroit Free Press):** "Attempts to market Detroit as a kind of 'Chicago lite' rang false with Detroiters. "

**Anne Trubek (founder of Belt Magazine, Cleveland, Ohio):** "Cleveland is never going to be Portland, no matter how many bike lanes and coffee shops. It's just not going to happen."

During the forum, additional opinions and observations were expressed on Twitter:

"In 50 years, what will we be wishing we hadn't done in terms of urban planning choices?"

"When I think of Tacoma, I think of Cascadia, not its individual cities. Take advantage of that."

"Do we use the brand for insiders or outsiders?"

"In branding, how does a city get beyond design heavy/execution accidental planning without selling results short?"

"Is it possible to have an authentic branding process without desperation? Someone will be left out. Is it something other than branding?"

"Don't just take the largest word in the cloud and go with it. Leave it all up."

"When we engage diverse people, how do we reach consensus? We need to have the conversations about cities in small and alternative venues. It takes going out to talk, not always inviting people in."

"Is there more than one brand for a city?"

"How do we retain the assets we have? Or do we just get used to not holding onto them (Russell, Chihuly museum, etc.)?"

"The DNA of Tacoma is industrial; the brand is the process, not the product."

"We don't forget our history because we don't want to go back."

“If the waterfront is important, why is it not a part of the educational process?”

“It is one thing to know who we are; another thing to others to know who we are.”

“Tell the story of what Tacoma is, to touch a nerve within the city.”

“This is a regional conversation, not simply a Tacoma one.”

“First person stories that have not been told (irreverent, passionate, rooted in the ethos of Tacoma) have great power vs. those told by someone else.”

“Tell the truth if you rebrand.”

“Listen to the newcomers to the city; they are capable of breaking the logjams in thinking about our city.”

“In creating a better brand, who gets to be the protagonist?”

“I only get to start this. My successors will finish it. Nobody is allowed to derail it.”

“The keepers of the vision for St. Paul, Minnesota were external to government—that lets them maintain a stewardship role. Look at Halifax, Nova Scotia; Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario; and Edmonton, Alberta as examples.”

“Think of Tacoma as a mid-sized city, not a second city to Seattle.”

“When should public money be invested in projects? When should it be avoided?”

“Bring the humanities into these conversations, not only designers and architects.”

“This work takes leadership willing to take some unpopular stands, putting a stake in the ground, and fostering ideas other than the least common denominator. What kind of shared stories can happen?”

“What would it mean to be a city where tribal members are esteemed and visible?”

“What would it mean to be a city where women can thrive as leaders?”

“Use children when designing the future of Tacoma’s waterfront spaces.”