

Letter to the Editor:

The Unrealized Potential of Sturgeon Bay's West Side

February 17, 2017 12:23 pm
By: Samuel W. Shogren, MPA

The Unrealized Potential of Sturgeon Bay's West Side:
How Heritage and Culture Can Build Economic Opportunity and Transform a Community
Samuel W Shogren, MPA © 2017

It's time for a new conversation regarding the Westside.

A conversation that, for planning purposes, ignores property boundaries for a moment, to see a larger historic maritime cultural landscape that can create a larger economic opportunity for the community. A conversation that sees the whole of a neighborhood as an asset. A conversation that utilize the tools provided by heritage and environmental tourism as an engine of economic growth and development.

Behind the recent legal storm clouding the future of the Westside and the development of some of the last publicly held land on Sturgeon Bay lies a "Perfect Storm" of unrecognized shared interests, motivations, and development plans. The building blocks are present to create a uniquely local tourism attraction that celebrates the heritage of Sturgeon Bay if all the players can be brought to the table. But it will take private, public, and philanthropic dollars to pull it off. By combining the parallel efforts of private developers and the community campaigns to expand the Maritime Museum, the County Museum, and the Save the Elevator campaign together with the recently announced NOAA National Maritime Sanctuary for Lake Michigan (and NOAA's need for an operations base) the funding and synergies are present to develop a cultural attraction that will drive tourism to the Westside and Downtown Sturgeon Bay and expand the resident workforce in the community.

To sell heads in bed, those heads need something to do during the other 16 hours of the day. Drawing on my thirty years of experience in leading museums and working for some the largest history museums in the United States and my work with the Oregon Cultural Trust, the Working Waterfront Museum, the Washington County Museum, the Maine Governor's Office, the Maine State Tourism Commission, and cross boarder collaborations with the Provence of New Brunswick let me share some observations and lessons that lead to success in creating maritime and heritage attractions.

Lesson 1. Co-location of Cultural Attractions Builds Success – Separation Spells Struggle

When I relocated the Washington County Museum outside of Portland, Oregon from a rural location at a community college to the main street of the county seat close of two theater companies, art galleries, restaurants and shopping museum visitation increased 10-fold despite the greatest recession since the 1930's. And a local developer built and opened a micro-brewery a few blocks down main street after the new museum opened. Just like restaurants and gas stations do better when clustered together -so to do museums and other cultural attractions.

In Sturgeon Bay the maritime museum and the county history museum need to join forces to

build a co-located museum attractions that build a broader “experience” for tourists visiting Sturgeon Bay. Urban and city environments need a density of experiences in terms of attractions, restaurants and lodgings that encourage walking and socialization. Open space, in the context of Sturgeon Bay’s West Side, forces attractions and businesses apart decreasing the economic vitality of the effort and less return on investment for both private and public dollars.

Lesson 2. Science Sells – And Fish Do Too

More people visit science museums than art or history museums. Aquariums and marine science centers are also strong magnets attracting tourism dollars that spill over into the neighborhood economy. Even small marine science centers attract school groups and families – all year long. Here in Oregon, Oregon State University operates the H. Marine Science Center with hands on experiments and touch tanks and small aquariums for families and students to visit all year round. And it is located very near the Oregon Aquarium.

The last I heard from members in the local community, universities on the Great Lakes were looking for a new location for a marine science center. And NOAA needs an operations center for the National Marine Sanctuary and NOAA’s oceanographic research vessels need a home base; and the families that operate those vessels and conduct the research need a place to live. Imagine a complex that includes a maritime museum, a history museum, and a marine science center all located within the same economic redevelopment plan. Imagine too the business opportunities of commercial and retail space abutting those attractions and the economic synergizes that can develop for the West Side.

Lesson 3. The most successful heritage and scientific attractions build out – not up, and they incorporate the historic landscape and buildings.

When the aquarium was built in Monterey CA. they did so by repurposing an old sardine cannery. When they expanded (twice) with modern construction they went horizontal and took their design cues from the other buildings of Cannery Row. The most successful maritime museums who are members of the Council of American Maritime Museums all created “campuses” or clusters of buildings. In my time as Curator of the Penobscot Marine Museum in Maine I developed exhibits for and “curated” a collection twelve historic and modern structures with over 22,000 sq. ft. of displays. Maine Maritime Museum preserves the buildings and heritage of the Percy and Small shipyard and covers 20 acres. Mystic Seaport Museum, the nation’s largest maritime museum covers 19 acres and exceeds 50 buildings and structures. Clusters of buildings and structures that tell a story of the community and its maritime activities creates a sense of “value for the dollar” in the mind of a museum visitor. By moving visitors through a landscape of smaller structures a sense of place is created and the co-location of different attractions is possible. Incorporating elements and styles of heritage architecture create a sense of place in a changing world.

Communities across the country are discovering that preserving, and including elements of what was present before builds a richness of experience. A recent tour of the redevelopment efforts in Wilmington, Delaware and proposed plans for Portland, Oregon’s South Waterfront both include the preservation of gantry cranes and other elements of a maritime past. Preservation of the Granary and its incorporation into a heritage attraction is necessary to provide authenticity and an icon symbolizing Sturgeon Bay’s disappearing working waterfront.

Lesson 4: Promote and Financially Support the Creation of Cultural Infrastructure

In the mid-1990s as a member of the Maine Governor’s Taskforce for Heritage and Cultural Tourism we reinvented the state’s approach to selling “heads in bed” by focusing on building collaborations among heritage, cultural and tourism operators that celebrated the place and the idea of Maine. We promoted the rich history and culture – including lobsters and lighthouses – but all writers, artists and maritime commerce. We focused on improving the cultural infrastructure of the state to provide attractions and events that drew “folks from away” to spend time in the community and in doing so we increased hotel occupancy rates. Our efforts, along with similar efforts in Oregon, were recognized by the Pew Charitable Trusts as national models for combining economic development with culture and heritage.

Heritage and cultural tourists stay longer and spend more money than any other form of tourism. People want to encounter a real past with real objects and real heritage buildings. Look at the numbers generated by American’s visiting England and Europe for vacation for a “cultural experience.”

Supporting a healthy Main Street program, building collaboration, and partnerships between the public and private sectors, between the heritage and environmental communities, between industry and government, between philanthropy and private investment is the only comprehensive, between public and private land owners is the only real solution and way forward for Sturgeon Bay and the rebirth of the Westside.

My recommendation to my hometown is to pull back and develop a new comprehensive development plan that builds on the lessons learned above and the underlying maritime cultural landscape below. A plan that celebrates past, present and future. A plan that seeks to draw people into the community and make them stay because there is so much to do here with new attractions that it fill their day. An active vibrant waterfront built on a new cultural district located on the Westside and within a short “ferry ride” to downtown.

Bio

Samuel Shogren, is a 1978 graduate of Sturgeon Bay High School and former sailing instructor at the Sturgeon Bay Yacht Club. A trained Historical Archaeologist, Sam is a former member of the Maine Governor’s Taskforce for Heritage & Cultural Tourism, and the former Executive Director of the Working Waterfront Museum, the Aspen Historical Society, and the Washington County Museum. He is the previously served as Curator of the AAM accredited Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport, Maine and served on the Creative Advocacy Network for the Mayor’s Office, City of Portland, Oregon. Sam authored the County Cultural Plan for Washington County, Oregon.

Sam has spoken before to the North Dakota Governor’s Conference on Tourism, the American Association of Museums, the New England Association of Museum, Maine Archives and Museums, and the Oregon Heritage Conference on tourism, strategic planning, and historic preservation. He has developed over 60 museum exhibitions and written for Maine Boats and Harbor’s magazine. WoodenBoat Magazine and the Portland Merchant’s Exchange have published his photography. Sam is currently a consultant in private practice in Portland, Oregon, and a member of the Lower Columbia River Harbor Safety Committee.

1. Christie on Feb 17, 2017 at 02:07 pm said:

Wonderful.

2. Don on Feb 17, 2017 at 02:26 pm said:

“By combining the parallel efforts of private developers and the community campaigns to expand the Maritime Museum, the County Museum, and the Save the Elevator campaign together with the recently announced NOAA National Maritime Sanctuary for Lake Michigan (and NOAA’s need for an operations base) the funding and synergies are present to develop a cultural attraction that will drive tourism to the Westside and Downtown Sturgeon Bay and expand the resident workforce in the community.”

What’s not to absolutely wish for here? Talking to you all, Thad, Josh, and Marty. You shouldn’t be leaving your offices today without first writing invitations to the NMS and NOAA.

3. Carri on Feb 17, 2017 at 04:44 pm said:

I have had the pleasure of speaking with Mr. Shogren a while back. My first impression was: THIS! This right here is what our city officials are not getting. He makes so many fantastic points, why list them? Just re-read it. Thank you for taking the time to put your experience and knowledge into writing, Mr. Shogren. Everyone here knows we need a year-round attraction. It’s what can set Sturgeon Bay apart from destinations further North and make us a destination unto ourselves. I’m convinced we can get this development right and construct a “larger economic opportunity for the community”.

Sam on Feb 19, 2017 at 11:36 pm said:

Thank you for your kind remarks.

4. Barbara on Feb 18, 2017 at 01:19 pm said:

Mr. Shogren, Thank you for your letter. I do not think we are thinking creatively nor have we understood that we have a history to be celebrated. Residents love to share thoughts of the way things were without understanding the value of that history and the unique spot we live in. We should not be Anywhere USA and expect a financial gain. This is what attracts visitors and as you mentioned an economic vitality.

Sam on Feb 19, 2017 at 11:35 pm said:

Fighting “Anywhere USA” is the challenge faced by communities across America. The solution is to dive deeply into your past and the unique culture that develops locally as people from communities and nations around the world learn to live together and develop shared values. Like our beloved Fish Boils – unique to America. A few years back as director of the local county museum I sat in on some local marketing and branding efforts by our county visitors association.

Washington County was the first county in Oregon. We are home to the world headquarters for NIKE. INTEL does all of their scientific research in Oregon. We are home to the Silicon forest. We are ethnically diverse with over 96 foreign languages spoke by kids attending local schools. What was decided our “brand” would be by the local visitors association? Great Shopping, Great Sports Facilities, and Wineries. Items found in communities across the country. Americans travel to Europe – and the world – to see “old things” – ancient temples, local color, and character, lobsters (I use to work in Maine), It is the unique culture and history that gives root to successful tourism. We found that our when I served on the Maine Governor’s Taskforce for Heritage and Cultural Tourism in the 1990’s. We went from selling head in beds – to the selling the culture of Maine. Sturgeon Bay can do the same.

5. Mike on Feb 19, 2017 at 08:04 am said:

These are the kinds of ideas and voices that need to be encouraged as the city gets a second chance to revisit the west side redevelopment issue, barring something unforeseen coming from Madison. I know that the Mayor will likely say that ideas such as these were considered in committee, then rejected for one reason or another, usually having to do with money. I sat in on several committee meetings over the past few years as this project, like Frankenstein’s monster, took on a life of its own; there was little or no sharing of ideas with members of the public. People were allowed to speak; committee members would generally listen (or pretend to listen), but no discussion or interaction usually took place. After all, an agenda was there to be followed, and most of the big decisions regarding the hotel and adjacent areas (like the granary) had already been decided. Now that the court has issued a judgment preventing the sale of the property for “private” development, I would love to see the city council invite people like Mr. Shogren to be part of a committee planning how best to utilize this property for “public” development.

Sam on Feb 19, 2017 at 11:21 pm said:

As to the process followed by the City I can not comment. I can offer the observation that across the country, and here in Oregon, design “charrettes” are used incorporating multiple public meetings, architects, and designers to sketch out how a community can repurpose land or a facility. Here outside of Portland, Oregon, adjacent to the second largest waterfall by volume (Willamette Falls) the community of Oregon City is repurposing a large industrial site and paper mill into a mixed-use development. One design feature is transforming a former pipe tunnel into a stunning river walk and public access point to the falls where none existed before. To learn more look here: <http://www.rediscoverthefalls.com/riverwalk/> A broader conversation also attracts more investors, more dollars from philanthropy and individuals, and small businesses looking for a new opportunity.

6. Dan on Feb 19, 2017 at 04:29 pm said:

Sam,

Thank you for the timely and thoughtful essay. Our community is the sum of our collective ideas and actions. We have great hopes for Sturgeon Bay. Thank you for helping us reflect on our assets and opportunities while our community is at this important cross roads. It would be helpful if your essay might get shared in a broader and more collaborative setting. Maybe we could start by asking the Mayor to put your essay in the local utility bill.

Dan Collins

Friends of the Sturgeon Bay Public Waterfront.

7. Martha on Feb 20, 2017 at 02:03 pm said:

Thank you Mr. Shogren! Your ideas for the future of our west side water development genuinely do speak to Sturgeon Bay becoming the focal point of Door County. In my 12 years as a resident, I have found it rich in every way, and contributing 365 days of the year. How do we begin?

8. Laurel on Feb 20, 2017 at 03:13 pm said:

Thank you so much, Sam, for reframing this in a larger, hopeful, visionary context. Your points perfectly echo those made Ed McMahon, one of the country's most respected urban planners, when he was here seven or eight years ago. Save what makes you unique; you can't go wrong if you do. Save the authentic over the fake. Treasure and cultivate a sense of place. Save the very best of what you've got for everyone and the economic prosperity will follow.

We are so fortunate to have it all here in Sturgeon Bay — natural beauty and historic/cultural riches. We have a great story to tell. This could be so much fun! I see it in our future: "Let Sturgeon Bay tug on your heartstrings!"