

UO could have an inspiring riverfront future

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By Allen Hancock, Bart Johnson and George Evans

Let's examine two options for the future of the University of Oregon's riverfront property:

Option 1: The current plan

It's a beautiful evening in 2028, and you've just finished dinner at a restaurant overlooking the Willamette River where the Eugene Water & Electric Board headquarters used to be. You're with an out-of-town friend, and you decide to take a stroll upriver toward the UO: "Let's watch the sunset from the Frohnmayer Footbridge."

As you walk along the river path onto UO land, you pass a long fence on the right. A few cars remain scattered in a parking lot beside an office building.

As you walk farther, the forest narrows to accommodate more fences, this time separating you from large synthetic playing fields. A chemical odor from a day of sun striking the artificial turf fills the air. Near the bridge, a buzz pierces the quiet as floodlights switch on to illuminate the fields.

"Doesn't this bother wildlife?" your friend asks.

Sighing, you reply, "Yeah, let's go somewhere else. It's impossible to enjoy the sunset here anymore."

Option 2: A vision for the future

Finishing dinner, your friend says, "Let's walk along the river. I've heard it's amazing."

As you walk along the river path onto UO land, a meadow on the right reveals a bright patch of wildflowers. A sign describes the fragile wetland ecology and efforts to restore and enhance this important habitat. You speak briefly with researchers who are using the site to explore how soil microbes could be used to break down pollutants in stormwater runoff.

On the left, a newly restored riparian forest gives way to an overlook where art students paint the evening scene. Approaching the river, you see bats swooping to catch insects along the shore.

"They reconfigured the bank to improve salmon habitat and provide a place for people to reach the river's edge. Students lead the restoration and monitoring — let's go check it out."

Continuing upstream, you pass a student farm. "They're studying how native pollinators can support crops now that honeybees have declined," you explain, "and they donate the produce to a food bank. The classes are incredibly popular."

“This is so inspiring. How did it get this way?” your friend asks.

You explain, “The UO administration had foresight back in 2018. For decades, there were plans for buildings and parking lots here — and, later, artificial playing fields, too. But the leadership heard from faculty and students that land along a world-class river shouldn’t be squandered. So they made a strategic decision to align the use of land the university holds in public trust with its academic mission by using the riverfront for multidisciplinary research and education.

“They understood the riverfront would attract students worldwide by providing learning opportunities that other schools couldn’t offer. And they knew that students thrive when given hands-on experiences in outdoor classrooms to balance time in front of computers and in lectures. The administration also saw an opportunity to capitalize on the UO’s green reputation with a showcase restoration project.

“Alumni were captivated by this vision and new donors came forward to support land stewardship and to develop this outdoor laboratory. The riverfront project bolstered the UO’s reputation as an innovative institution, which encouraged top-notch researchers to apply for jobs at the new Knight Campus for Accelerating Scientific Impact on Franklin Boulevard — grant money followed.”

“Brilliant!” your friend exclaims.

“The university also heard from community members and city officials that the shops, restaurants and apartments on the old EWEB site would flourish with a crown jewel upstream. Numerous organizations were involved in the restoration work, and now thousands of people — locals and visitors — are inspired by the UO’s riverfront as they walk to and from events at Autzen Stadium. This special place has become a source of campus pride!”

Impressed, your friend states, “The UO is a real leader.”

“The UO deserves a lot of credit but also drew inspiration from other schools. Wellesley College converted a parking lot on its waterfront into an award-winning landscape, and in 2017 the University of San Francisco bought a 100-acre organic farm for students to engage in hands-on learning. These efforts required foresight and resolve.”

“And the playing fields?” your friend asks, as a flock of birds settles nearby.

“When the administration consulted faculty members who study the future of cities, they learned it wouldn’t be long before self-driving vehicles dramatically reduced the need for parking. Of course, that’s obvious now. So the administration designated existing parking lots to be used for future athletic fields. The riverfront restoration has been a win for everyone.”

“Wow!” your friend says. “Look at that sunset.”

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