

A Watershed Time

For the Eugene Millrace

Doubtless you have been waking up with this question burning in your mind: What is the urban watershed of the Eugene Millrace?

And then you discover that it's a bigger area than you realized, that it extends all the way from the South Hill flanks of Judkin's Point, includes most of the Fairmount Neighborhood, the UO campus and as far south as Edison School and then west to our new courthouse and the EWEB headquarters. And it begins to dawn on you how large a role Eugene's historic Millrace is about to play in Eugene's riverfront future.

You wake up to the fact that all the important projects you have been hearing about — the basketball arena, Walnut Station, Franklin Boulevard, the EmX, the university riverfront, the downtown riverfront, the extension of 6th Avenue, the area between Broadway and the new courthouse, the EWEB property — all make their home in the Millrace's urban watershed.

Water is the universal transporter and the universal solvent. Surface water in a watershed is ground water exposing itself and mixing itself with runoff and all that it has absorbed along the way. In our Millrace watershed it gathers up dog poop in Hendricks Park, fertilizer and pesticides from the lawns of Fairmount, all the heavy metal and petro-chemical leftovers from our roads, cars and trucks, and carries it to our historic waterway and the Willamette River.

In the river salmon swim, expecting us to be clean and thoughtful neighbors.



In the Millrace watershed it isn't just the ducks that create the stinky water; it is all of us Ducks! It is a plain fact that it is the oil and grease and toxic chemicals from urban watersheds that have the biggest impact on the life of our waterways. Knowing that, we are obligated to become better neighbors.

It took us a while, but now we get it, and it is a brilliant, magnificent strategy. Congressman Peter DeFazio has included \$15 million for "upper Willamette River watershed restoration and the Eugene Millrace" in the recently passed Water Resources bill. Urban watersheds have the most concentrated impact on the Willamette, and the Millrace watershed in Eugene is the principal urban watershed of the upper Willamette.

Is it not clear? We are being given the opportunity to plan for and create a modern urban watershed, one that updates our ecology to include us human Ducks and all we do. We are being given the opportunity to connect our riverfront urban projects and our watershed in a beautiful, historic and healthy way.

It would be folly on stilts not to seize this unique chance to show that we are aware, worthy and able to live up to the DeFazio challenge and to tie it all together on our urban riverfront.

Do time and memory run downhill like water and pool in the low points? It certainly seems that way along the historic Millrace, which powered our mills, carried our local products on barges to town and was the center of university social life until the early '30s.

I look downstream from the pond at Onyx Bridge, and I see Bill Bowerman sliding down the slide from the top floor of the old Anchorage before there was a Louie's. I see Catherine Lauris and Charlie Porter swimming upstream against the strong current. "You had to be a strong swimmer," our first woman city councilor explained.

And I recall the legend of Millrace Charlie, the boy who was conceived on a warm summer night in a canoe somewhere in the upper Millrace. When I would often tell this story and reveal that that boy grew up to be Charlie Porter, I remember how delighted Charlie would be and how devilishly he could heh, heh, and smile. To my knowledge, he never explicitly denied it.

And I recall my friend Ian Mc Clure, who would poke me with the reminder that,

"Great cities remember themselves."

Today the Millrace lies at the heart of many plans and possibilities and could link old times and new through updated watershed thinking. In the East Broadway and courthouse district, for example, it has the potential to become the magical San Antonio-like centerpiece of new mixed-use development that leads us under 6th Avenue and the UP railroad tracks back to the riverfront.

On the reclaimed EWEB property, a rebuilt riparian riverbank centered around a Millrace-Willamette River confluence would create a long sought urban-riverfront connection and channel a north-south open space corridor all the way back to a proposed Cannery Square at 8th Avenue.

I wear two watches, one on each wrist. One is for today's time, and the other tells landscape time. Landscape time tells us the time of watersheds, eustacy (the rise and fall of the level of the sea) and the hydrologic cycle. Did you know that it takes two million years for water to completely cycle itself around the planet?

But both watches today mark the same event — that the time has come for the resurfacing of the Eugene Millrace and the building of a modern, sustainable, life-enhancing Millrace urban watershed.