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Des Moines has ambitious plans from UW students for a virtual makeover of its marina and downtown

By Cara Solomon

Times South King County Reporter

With the sun sinking, and the sailboats skimming, life on the water looked lush. Gordon Kells-Murphy stood on the bow of his boat, taking it all in. Just past the jetty, the Des Moines Marina was quiet, not a dot of a person in sight.

"It's awful nice stuff," said Kells-Murphy, a high-school teacher.

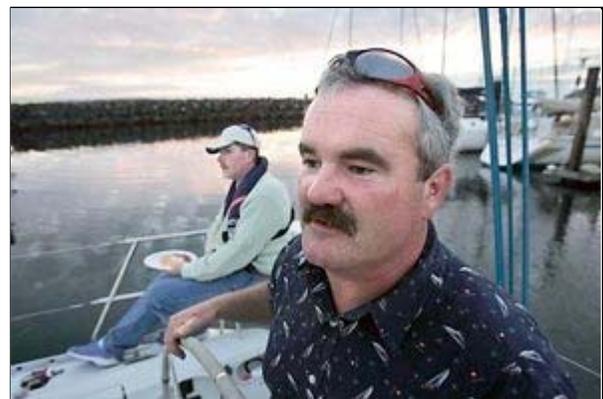
For years now, as South King County has grown all around it, Des Moines has kept this midsized marina to itself. About 750 slips. An all-volunteer yacht club. Residents walking loops around the lip. But none of this is promoting the city of Des Moines, which has a \$600,000 shortfall this year.

So plans are afoot to take this place public, part of a larger effort to revitalize the nearby downtown. There is talk of "greening" the marina, and adding boutiques alongside the boats. The city also expects to redesign the docks at some point, a nod to the demand for the larger boats.



ERIKA SCHULTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The city of Des Moines, with nearly six miles of Puget Sound shoreline, is seeking ways to revitalize its marina and the nearby downtown. The South King County city is about halfway between Tacoma and Seattle, and includes a fishing pier at the north end of the marina. Across the Sound is Vashon Island.



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Gordon Kells-Murphy, right, a high-school teacher, brings his 36-foot sailboat back into the Des Moines Marina after an evening race.

Patrice Thorell, the city's parks and recreation director, has dreamed about this since she stepped foot in Des Moines 13 years ago. South King County's population has grown by more than 100,000 in less than two decades, and other cities are jockeying for their money. Kent is building an events center. Auburn is calling itself the cultural capital of South King County.

But who else has a marina, sitting pretty on Puget Sound?

"It's our time," she said.

Calmer talk prevails

There's nothing new about this idea of modernizing the Des Moines Marina. The first "master plan" emerged back in 2001, and significant work on the infrastructure has been done since then. But the cosmetic parts of the plan sat there, untouched, while the City Council fought about it — and everything else — for several years.

"They couldn't even agree what time it was," said Mayor Bob Sheckler.

In recent years, the council has turned over, and calmer talk has focused on how to move forward. Someone even drummed up a theme for the revival. But it was a "yawny" sailboat theme, said Thorell, so the city hired architecture students from the University of Washington to brainstorm something better.

They arrived in the spring, set up shop in a vacant storefront on the main street, and got to work on what city officials are now calling the Des Moines Marina District.

The City Council is still debating whom it should be designed for — residents of the town, or residents of the region. But there is little debate about the need to do something different.



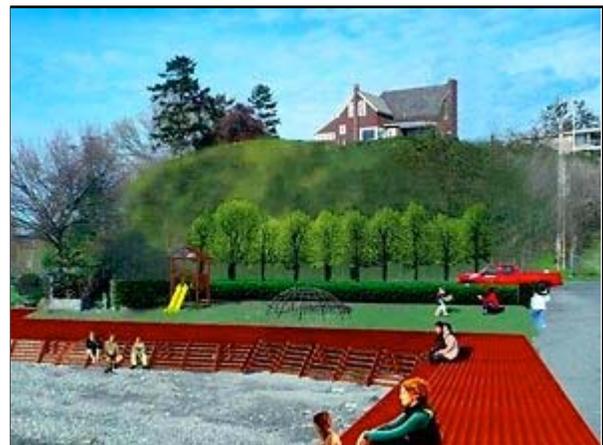
ERIKA SCHULTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

City officials hired University of Washington architecture students to brainstorm ways to improve downtown Des Moines. The city has a \$600,000 shortfall this year.



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Paul Jones, owner of Brigadoon, participates in a low-key Thursday night regatta out of the 38-year-old Des Moines Marina.



UW DEPT. OF ARCHITECTURE

Ideas from UW students for updating Des Moines include bleacher-type benches

This city of 29,000 is living on a tight budget. The Port of Seattle is redeveloping 89 acres just south of nearby Sea-Tac International Airport into a business park and retail center; that should bring in thousands of jobs eventually. But downtown needs to generate more dollars, city officials said, and the 38-year-old marina is key.

The UW's "Storefront Studio" has worked in struggling pockets before, from White Center to Kent to Carnation. But Professor Jim Nicholls, who created the project, said Des Moines was the first city to ask for a virtual makeover of its downtown.

On his first trip to the marina, Nicholls could see why.

"I was underwhelmed," he said. "It was a lot of car parking and boat parking."

The students unveiled a different Des Moines the other day — colorful storefront facades, watercolor banners, a twisting sea-serpent sculpture that stretched along the breakwater. Residents stood surrounded by posters, tilting their heads, pointing their fingers at the vision the students had pulled from their minds.

"What they're doing for this little city of ours is fantastic," said Gary Hisel, 76, who lived for years on a boat at the marina. "All we got to do now is find the money."

Next week, the City Council will consider the whole grand plan, from the shops scattered atop a new parking garage to the bleacher-type benches descending into the Sound.

At first blush, city officials said, some small touches seem easy to implement. The image of a ship, painted in such a way that it unfolds up a flight of concrete stairs. Framed photographs of seafaring life, posted in circular form on the railings.

descending into Puget Sound.



ERIKA SCHULTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Stella Stricker, 2, plays in Puget Sound with her father, Dave Stricker, of Kent, and brother Evan Stricker, 9 months, at Des Moines Beach Park.

The sea-serpent idea was a big hit with Des Moines Harbormaster Joe Dusenbury. It got him thinking: What if the sculpture was made of fiberglass? He could detach it from the breakwater during the winter months, so storms could not toss it — then fit the piece back into position when the summer tourist season came around.

Small boaters worried

This is all very well and good, this talk of making the marina more upscale. But what happens to the small boater?

For 11 years, Kells-Murphy has given this marina his business. He likes the peace of the place. He also likes the price — \$300 a month to rent a slip. If those UW plans get put in place, he said, and the marina starts to draw a more sophisticated crowd, that rent is likely to jump sky-high.

You'll have to pardon Kells-Murphy if his enthusiasm for the makeover is muted.

"They're pretty, they're nice," he said of the plans. "But they're going to push me out of the marina."

He spoke from the wheel of his 36-foot boat, steering back into the marina after a Thursday night regatta. These low-key races are a highlight for him — seven or so sailboats, and a rotating crew of volunteers. That particular night, there was a bartender, a housewife, a salesperson and a chef, shooting the starter gun, raising the flag, running the race from the committee boat, the trawler Brigadoon.

When it was done, Kells-Murphy pulled up for some social time — picked at a piece of lasagna brought by Gayle Stahl, the bartender at Anthony's on the marina for the past 22 years. Drank a beer beside Phil Chin, the chef, and member of the local yacht club.

In this Thursday night family, there is some

The Des Moines Marina

Des Moines is hoping to make over its mid-sized marina, as part of a larger effort to revitalize its downtown.



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support for the city's ambitions. Stahl, for one, thinks it sounds like fun, to bring more bustle to the area. The 3-year-old farmer's market has already added so much to Saturdays. But there's also concern, that gentrification would do what gentrification always does: change the character of a place.

"It'll be weird to have the marina done different," said Sandy Lewis, a resident. "This place has always been, like, kind of Zen."

Earlier that night, as the sailboats moved around the starting line, John Currie, a race regular, stood on Brigadoon in his usual stance: face up to his camera, capturing the scene. For years, he raced in Seattle regattas. Different scene entirely down here.

Currie called out names, clicking the shutter when friends turned his way. A toddler waved at him from the bow of a boat. Chin fired the shot that started the race. There was a hush on the water. The boats idled, waiting for a breeze.

"And they're off," said Chin, smiling. "Like a galloping herd of turtles."

Cara Solomon: 206-464-2024 or csolomon@seattletimes.com. News Researcher Gene Balk contributed to this report.

Information

To learn more about the UW Department of Architecture's Storefront Studio program, go to: www.storefrontstudio.org

Storefront Studio

The UW Department of Architecture's Storefront Studio works to revitalize downtown areas in King County. Over the years, about 80 students have crafted a vision for eight different communities using archival research, photographs and computer imaging.

The students work out of a vacant storefront on a main street. Business owners, residents and city officials provide feedback, and help to shape the final product.

The vision for the Des Moines Marina District will go before the City Council at 7:30 p.m. July 17.

Past projects include:

- **The Ave in Seattle's University District:** redesigned building facades and constructed a new front desk and entry area for the YMCA.
- **Carnation:** redesigned the facades of eight buildings and a farmer's market picnic shelter, also created a welcome sign.
- **Kent:** renovated several buildings, including Oddfellows Hall, and created different uses for smaller city parks. Redesigned back facades of restaurants facing commuter rail lines.
- **White Center:** created street banners, redesigned a number of facades and built markers for the farmer's market.

Cara Solomon, staff reporter

Des Moines

Population: About 29,000

Average household income in 2000: \$48,971

Median house price in 2007: \$325,000

Puget Sound shoreline: 5.9 miles. The total city is 6.78 square miles.

Notable attractions: Saltwater State Park, Highline Community College's Marine Science and Technology Center.

Source: city of Des Moines