



FIG. 7-1 Wright Park, located in North Downtown, constitutes a significant open space amenity for the City of Tacoma. Its 27 acres are home to more than 600 trees representing 150 different varieties as well as many recreational amenities.

# 07

## OPEN SPACE

Compared to other areas of Tacoma, North Downtown has a relatively high proportion of park space because it is home to 27-acre Wright Park, the crown jewel of the downtown park system. Although the subarea has a relatively high acreage of formal park space, it has only one community garden, which is not located in a place that serves the densest multifamily neighborhoods in North Downtown. Informal green and open spaces such as community gardens, pocket parks, playgrounds and artful stormwater features could bring relief to the hardscape of the urban center while providing valuable public amenities to those who live, work and visit North Downtown.

Planning for future open space should not only be tailored to provide a sufficient amount of diverse, accessible, usable open spaces, but also to leverage the network of open spaces by enhancing the connectivity among them. Creating legible, efficient, non-motorized connections and trails linking open spaces would not only improve accessibility and usability, but would also help to knit together the Subarea and integrate it with surrounding neighborhoods. In particular, the waterfront along the Foss Waterway and Commencement Bay is a unique and valuable public amenity that should be easily accessible, welcoming, and usable for residents, workers, visitors, and water-oriented businesses.

The development of new open spaces in North Downtown presents the opportunity to incorporate green infrastructure such as rain gardens, swales, permeable pavement, and rainwater capture into the design of streetscapes. These natural drainage strategies help to reduce toxic runoff to local water bodies while decreasing capacity demand on the City's stormwater system. Natural drainage features can also be designed to enhance the aesthetic quality and educational value of open spaces. Enhancing surface water quality is particularly important in the Subarea

given the significant public investment that has been expended for the cleanup of the Foss Waterway.

The overall goals for open space in the subarea are captured by the Vision outlined at the beginning of the planning process, which states that North Downtown should be “an environmentally-responsive urban center which values its green spaces and strives to maintain and enhance existing open spaces, parks, recreational opportunities, view corridors, community gardens, and the connections between each while carefully adjusting to local terrain conditions.” Specific objectives include the following:

- Maintain and grow the physical and visual connections between the Downtown and Stadium Districts and the Thea Foss Waterway
- Retain and encourage open spaces and gathering places
- Continue to support integration with the City's Open Space program and foster a partnership with Metro Parks Tacoma

FIG. 7-1 NORTH DOWNTOWN OPEN SPACES (EXISTING)



## **EXISTING OPEN SPACES**

Existing parks and open spaces in and around the Subarea are listed below and illustrated in **Figure 7-2**.

### **Existing Open Space Inventory**

#### Parks and open spaces:

- Wright Park
- Thea's Park
- McCormick Park
- Theater Square
- Frost Park
- Ben Gilbert Park
- Fireman's Park
- Spanish Steps
- Norton Memorial Park
- Center for Urban Waters Esplanade
- Downtown Hillclimbs

#### Community gardens:

- Gallucci Learning Garden

#### Habitat Corridors:

- Schuster Parkway corridor

#### Nearby Parks and Open Spaces outside the Subarea:

- Lots for Tots Park
- Neighbors Park
- Jefferson Ave. Mini-Park
- Tollefsen Plaza
- Tacoma Art Museum Plaza
- Foss Waterway Esplanade

The City of Tacoma's Open Space Program manages open space habitat areas, and the Streets and Grounds Division develops and maintains a number of small urban parks, such as Frost Park, McCormick Park and Theater Square. The City's role in providing for the future open space needs for North Downtown Subarea is likely to be limited



FIG. 7-1 Picnic areas and pathways at Wright Park.



FIG. 7-1 Wright Park's one-and-a-half-acre duck pond (originally named Bird Lake) was constructed during the park's expansion in the early 1900s.



FIG. 7-1 McCormick Park is an urban open space that doubles as a hillclimb, connecting South Fawcett Avenue and Tacoma Avenue south.



FIG. 7-1 Fireman's Park, located on a hillside above the Foss Waterway, provides views of Commencement Bay, Mt. Rainier, and the Port of Tacoma.



FIG. 7-1 Thea's Park, a 3.4-acre open space located at the entrance to the Foss Waterway, provides public waterfront access and a boat launch.



FIG. 7-1 Theater Square provides an urban plaza with views and outdoor performance venues.

given the City's intentions to eventually transfer its park properties to Metro Parks Tacoma (MPT). MPT owns or manages most of Tacoma's open space lands and facilities intended for high-impact access and/or recreation. MPT parks located within the Subarea boundary include Wright Park, Thea's Park and Firemen's Park.

- *Wright Park* provides a place to escape the urban surroundings and provides many recreational amenities, including lawn bowling/bocce, a sprayground and playground, and trails for walking and biking
- *Fireman's Park* provides a viewpoint, trails, and interpretive historic information, including a totem pole
- *Thea's Park* provides viewpoints, picnic tables, trails, and waterfront access including a beach and a walk-up boat launch

Given existing population and employment conditions in the Subarea, there is sufficient open space in or near the Subarea to serve the current needs of residents, employees, and visitors. However, North Downtown's residential and workforce populations are likely to increase over the coming years, and additional small open spaces within the urban area would provide spaces for downtown residents to engage in community-building activities, such as children's playgrounds or places for urban gardening.

Later sections of this chapter provides suggestions on how the Subarea could cultivate a more varied environmental character for downtown while strengthening the identity of its urban neighborhoods, making North Downtown a more attractive place to live, work and play.

**RECOMMENDATION OS-X: Continue to support integration with the City's open space program and foster partnerships with Metro Parks Tacoma.**

**RECOMMENDATION OS-X: Maintain and enhance existing open spaces within the North Downtown Subarea.**

**RECOMMENATION OS-X: Develop a system of coordinated gathering spaces, green streets, greenways and hillclimbs to link North Downtown parks, recreational facilities and other open space resources.**

## **FUNDING STRATEGIES**

The current fiscal climate makes funding the construction and maintenance of public open space a challenge. A recent example that highlights this challenge is Pugnetti Park in South Downtown, currently owned by the State of Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT). In the spring of 2012, WSDOT put the property up for sale, but neither the City of Tacoma nor Metro Parks was interested in purchasing it. (For reference, the asking price was in the range of \$500,000 - \$600,000, with estimated annual maintenance fees of \$15,000 to \$20,000.) Several possible strategies for funding open space initiatives in North Downtown are discussed below.

### **Impact Fees**

One potential tool for generating open space funding is an impact fee on new development that would help pay for open space that adds value to that development. However, in a marginal real estate market such as currently exists in North Downtown, impact fees could be a counterproductive encumbrance on redevelopment. Currently, the City of Tacoma does not assess any impact fees on development. But as North Downtown builds out over time and the real estate market improves, it may eventually become practical to phase in impact fees to fund open space. This approach would be justified by the fact that the need for more open space would increase with population and job growth. Details regarding rates and trigger points for phasing in the impact fee would require further investigation.

**RECOMMENDATION OS-X: Explore establishing a phased-in development impact fee to fund open space improvements in North Downtown.**

### **Integrated Natural Drainage and Open Space**

Open spaces can be designed or modified to integrate natural drainage features that reduce stormwater runoff, which has the dual benefit of reducing demand on the City's stormwater system, and reducing the flow

of pollution into local water bodies. These benefits are aligned with the goals of numerous agencies and organizations that could potentially provide partnership opportunities and funding for natural drainage projects in North Downtown open spaces. A primary goal of the Center for Urban Waters is to make Tacoma a national center for stormwater technology, a mission that could be supported by in-City demonstration projects.

The recent improvement project on Pacific Avenue integrated innovative stormwater management strategies into the design of the streetscape, including 14 rain gardens that treat downtown stormwater before it enters the Thea Foss Waterway. This project was funded by Federal (EPA and FHA) and State (2012 Jobs Now Act) grants together with matching funds provided by the City.

**RECOMMENDATION OS-3: Develop partnerships and seek funding from the City of Tacoma Public Works Department, the Center for Urban Waters, Citizens for a Healthy Bay, the Puget Sound Partnership, the Department of Ecology, the U.S. EPA, and other organizations to develop natural drainage features in existing and planned open spaces.**

## **Miscellaneous Funding Strategies**

The following strategies should be considered as possible funding options, depending on the timeframe, context, scale, and type of the desired open space in question.

### Local Improvement District (LID)

A Local Improvement District (LID) is an area within which a special tax is applied to properties that will benefit from a public investment. An LID could be formed to finance debt from the construction of open spaces that nearby property owners believe would bring value to their property. If certain areas are identified as having a critical need for future open space, a “no-protest agreement” could be established that waives a property owner’s right to protest the formation of an LID to finance future improvements.

### Parks Levy

In 2010, the City of Tacoma voters approved a Parks Levy on property taxes to fund Metro Parks Tacoma operations and maintenance. In the future, additional Parks levies could fund land acquisition and the construction of new parks if desirable.

### Small-Scale, Community-Driven Projects

Small-scale projects such as shared gardens can often be supported by local volunteers and by small grants spearheaded by community members. Though these projects may be small, they can have a powerful positive impact on their neighborhoods, demonstrating the kind of commitment that can also catalyze private investment. Small community gardens are particularly well-suited for this sort of volunteer-driven, low-budget approach to creating open space.

### Private Open Space

Privately-owned open space that is publicly accessible can contribute to the open space needs of North Downtown. Tacoma’s downtown zoning districts grant development capacity bonuses in exchange for the inclusion of public space on-site, the creation of pedestrian “hillclimb assists,” or the construction of, or in-lieu payment for, off-site open space (see Land Use Chapter).

If the City establishes a public/private partnership for development, the agreement can be tailored to require the provision of public open space in exchange for value being offered to the developer. This scenario offers the additional possibility for coordinating the location and site design of private open space with the larger public open space vision for North Downtown. Partnering with a developer in this way could encourage innovative strategies such as the use of natural drainage and rainwater harvesting to meet stormwater management requirements or allowing private development to utilize the right-of-way for integrated natural drainage and open space.

## **CATALYST PROJECTS**

### **Schuster Slope Design Standards**

The Bayside Trails system, which provided public access to and along the Schuster Slope, was opened in 1975. The system included five shelters along 2.5 miles of trail within a 20 acre greenbelt adjacent to the Stadium District and provided a pedestrian link to the waterfront, public access to an urban green space, recreational opportunities, and views of the water. Over time, issues of erosion and stormwater runoff, public safety concerns and high ongoing maintenance needs took their toll and led the City to close most of the system in 2000.

The coordinated, implemented vision of the Schuster Parkway Promenade offers the unique opportunity to reestablish the Bayside Trails system while preserving and enhancing public access to scenic views and boosting the health of a large recreational forest with vegetation management strategies. (For details on the Schuster Park Promenade project, see the Mobility Chapter.)

The Urban Forest Element of the City of Tacoma’s Comprehensive Plan identifies the views of Commencement Bay and Mt. Rainier from Stadium Way and Schuster slope as scenic views. The City’s Shoreline Master Program recognizes views as a form of public access that should be preserved and enhanced in concert with revegetation and improvement of the tree canopy.

Establishing design standards for the implementation of the corridor project presents an opportunity to improve pedestrian connections while balancing the preservation of public access to scenic views with revegetation, enhancing canopy cover, habitat and overall forest health and safety.

**RECOMMENDATION OS-X: Establish, adopt and implement design standards for the management of the Stadium/Schuster hillside.**

**RECOMMENDATION OS-X: Maintain existing and designate additional visual connections between North Downtown neighborhoods and the Thea Foss Waterway, recognizing the need to balance slope stabilization and native landscaping with the protection of public views.**



**FIG. 7-1** View of existing conditions on the Schuster Slope. GeoEngineers is currently working to evaluate trail-related opportunities to remove invasive plant species on the slope and to improve the quality of open space through replanting with appropriate native species.



**FIG. 7-1** View of a stairway constructed as part of the Bayside Trails system. Today, most of the original trail system remains closed to the public.



## UpGarden P-Patch: Bringing P-Patches to New Heights

The UpGarden P-Patch is part of the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods' P-Patch program, which helps manage almost 80 urban community gardens across the city. UpGarden, which was constructed on top of the Mercer Street parking garage at Seattle Center, is first rooftop community garden in the country.

UpGarden was conceived as part of an effort to increase the amount of community gardens in Seattle's densely populated Uptown neighborhood, where there was limited on-the-ground green space available to build such a garden. Although the project is temporary due to the expectation that the host parking garage will eventually be demolished, it will provide a place for community members to grow sun-loving plants for several years.



[www.upgarden.org/](http://www.upgarden.org/)

### Community gardens

The City of Tacoma partners with the Pierce Conservation District's Community Garden Program to support community gardens throughout the community. Tacoma is home to more than 35 community gardens, including 11 on City-owned property. Gardens are managed by Metro Parks, churches, community groups, schools and universities, and many other organizations.

North Downtown currently has only one community garden, the Gallucci Learning Garden, located at the intersection of South 14th and G Streets in the far southwest corner of the subarea. This demonstration garden is managed by the Tacoma Urban Land Trust, a non-profit organization that was formed to acquire and preserve green spaces within the city of Tacoma. The garden has an educational mission, and it provides gardening and cooking workshops for children and adults as well as hosting community events such as film-screenings and small concerts.

The majority of the subarea does not have access to a community garden. North Downtown's neighborhoods are relatively dense, urban areas and are poised for future growth in population and employment. As this occurs, demand for gardens can be expected to rise. Gardens can be added incrementally over the long term as growth and demand dictate.

Community gardens benefit neighborhoods by making them more welcoming, safer and aesthetically appealing. They build stronger communities by providing citizens with a place to make a meaningful connection with one another and to their local food system. In addition, community gardens increase access to healthy, fresh food, making it more affordable for urban residents. Growing and processing food locally can lead to opportunities for entrepreneurship.

Abandoned lots can be reclaimed by neighborhoods and used for community garden spaces. The St. Helens area in particular would be a good candidate for community gardens. The neighborhood has a high proportion of multifamily buildings - with residents that are less likely to have access to a yard or space for gardening. There are also many vacant and underutilized parcels

in this neighborhood that could host a temporary or permanent community garden. Also, the several vacant lots along Yakima Ave South could potentially provide sites for community gardens to be shared by the North Downtown and Hilltop subareas.

Models for temporary community gardens include UpGarden in Seattle, which was constructed on the underutilized rooftop of a parking garage (see sidebar). Temporary gardens can enable the provision of valuable community space by underutilized or unused parcels while development is stagnant or pending.

**RECOMMENDATION OS-X: Plant community gardens on vacant sites as well as other available lands within North Downtown to restore habitat, grow healthy foods for local use, and improve visual appearances, and in some cases to serve as temporary uses on sites waiting to be redeveloped.**

#### Visual Connections to the Thea Foss Waterway

Although North Downtown currently has limited physical connections to the Foss Waterway, the topography that separates it from the shoreline also creates opportunities for spectacular views—visual connections—between the Subarea and the waterway.

These views to the water help to define the character of the North Downtown Subarea and must be carefully considered as the area develops and as vegetation management strategies are updated along the Schuster Slope and in other areas. Establishing defined view corridors from key points in North Downtown could inform the development of new projects. Precedents for view protection regulation exist in the form of ordinances adopted by other nearby municipalities, including the cities of Seattle and Olympia.

**RECOMMENDATION OS-X: Identify public view corridors from North Downtown neighborhoods toward Commencement Bay and the Thea Foss Waterway; create appropriate view protection measures to preserve and protect them in coordination with the Schuster Parkway project and other ongoing initiatives.**



FIG. 7-1 Raised beds enable temporary rooftop community gardening at UpGarden in Seattle.



FIG. 7-1 The Gallucci Learning Garden, located at South 14th and G Streets in North Downtown Tacoma.



FIG. 7-1 A view over the Foss Waterway from North Downtown.

## PAVEMENT TO PARKS SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco's Pavement to Parks Program facilitates the conversion of utilitarian and often underused spaces in the street into publicly accessible open spaces available for all to enjoy. The Parklet Program provides a path for merchants, community organizations, business owners, and residents to take individual actions in the development and beautification of the City's public realm.

Parklets enhance neighborhoods by adding beauty and whimsy to city streets. They reflect the diversity and creativity of the people and organizations who sponsor and design them. They also reflect a municipal commitment to encouraging walking and biking, creating great streets, and strengthening communities.

The world's first formal public parklets were initially conceived and installed in San Francisco in 2010. As of January 2013, thirty-eight parklets have been installed throughout San Francisco, and the program is being emulated in cities around the world, including nearby Seattle.



[sfpavementtoparks.sfplanning.org/parklets.html](http://sfpavementtoparks.sfplanning.org/parklets.html)

### Small-scale Open Spaces and Gathering Places

As North Downtown grows, it will also be advantageous to promote open space projects that are more suited to incremental implementation in relatively small-scale steps over longer time spans, as described below.

#### Pocket Parks

Pocket parks are small public parks often created on a single vacant parcel or on small, irregular pieces of land that are underutilized. They are too small for most physical activities but may provide greenery, a place to sit, a children's playground, or a historic monument. Pocket parks have the potential to bring visual and spatial relief to the North Downtown's highly urban, industrial character. Like community gardens, pocket parks are likely to become more desired and valuable as the residential population of North Downtown increases. Over the long term, pocket parks can be created as demand dictates and as site opportunities present themselves.

#### Hillclimbs

Hillclimbs improve mobility and connectivity in areas where steep grades and lack of sidewalk continuity make pedestrian travel difficult. Downtown Tacoma has multiple hillclimbs, including one at 12th Street, which connects between Court C and Pacific Avenue; and one at McCormick Park, which connects the blocks between Court D and Tacoma Avenue South. The easternmost portion of the 12th Avenue hillclimb was improved in 2010 after the completion of the Pacific Plaza project and includes an art installation that is integrated into the stair and plaza design.

Hillclimbs also present an opportunity for partnership with private development to provide public amenities. Since hillclimbs provide public benefit in the form of improved connectivity, the City could offer developer concessions in exchange for provision of public hillclimbs. The Downtown zoning districts grant increased FAR for development projects that incorporate hillclimbs (see Land Use Chapter).

## Parklets

Parklets are essentially “mini-parks”—structures that convert a portion of the public right-of-way into small-scale public spaces. They also provide aesthetic enhancements to the streetscape, providing an economical solution to the need for increased public open space. These spaces are intended to activate streets, encourage walking and biking, and support local, street-oriented businesses.

In urban neighborhoods with a limited number of parks and open spaces, parklets can provide valuable privately-funded and privately-maintained public spaces for people to read, enjoy a cup of coffee or a bite to eat and socialize. Parklets convert an on-street parking space (or spaces) into a community gathering place, creating more vibrant neighborhoods and activating the streetscape. While parklets are funded and maintained by neighboring businesses, residents, and community organizations, they are publicly accessible and open to all.

San Francisco’s Pavement to Parks Program was the first formal public parklet program in the U.S. and has overseen the installation of more than 30 parklets (see sidebar for more information). The City of Seattle has also instituted a Pilot Parklet Program and will have its first three parklets completed by the summer of 2014, with more to come in future phases of the program.

## Public Art and Aesthetics

The quality of urban open space can be greatly enhanced with public art and well-designed pedestrian amenities such as lighting and benches. As a complementary strategy to creating new open space, the City should proactively pursue the funding of public art and aesthetic improvements in both existing and planned open spaces. Artistic features that celebrate stormwater as an amenity would be particularly appropriate.

Public art projects might also include interim or temporary projects on underutilized properties that could help to establish temporary open space amenities for North Downtown. Existing vacant lots and ongoing projects in the Subarea present opportunities for both permanent and temporary public art installations.



Depave is an organization with a mission of transforming paved places into community green spaces. The Portland-based organization gives community groups the tools to reclaim paved spaces in their cities, to be turned into attractive and usable community spaces.



*The Depave project intersection at Sprague and Division.*

Depave broke ground on a Tacoma project in March of 2014. City of Tacoma Environmental Services, along with partner agencies Depave, River Network, Stewardship Partners, Pierce Conservation District, and funding agency the Russell Family Foundation, invited the public to break up pavement and replace it with landscaping at one corner of the intersection at Division and Sprague, several blocks west of the North Downtown Subarea.

The Tacoma project, which Depave calls a “Puget Sound Pilot Project,” will transform the bleak, overpaved intersection to create “green pockets with trees and native plants around this paved island at a unique intersection in Tacoma.”

<http://depave.org/>