

Lighting The Candle of Development

By Jim West

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Drive north along I-5 and just beyond Exit 7, you enter a stretch of highway where cranes and concrete dominate the skyline. You're seeing the fourth stage of the 17-year, \$133 million Salmon Creek Interchange Project, which is the primary spark to ignite a fuse that literally changes the face of Clark County.

The population in Salmon Creek increased rapidly in the 1990's with housing, retail, office space, a hospital and a college campus replacing what used to be farms and open space. Today, NE 134th Street is used by all local east-west traffic to cross I-5 and I-205, and provides access to both freeways from the Salmon Creek area. The close proximity of traffic signals on NE 134th Street and high traffic volumes in the area created gridlock, traffic back-ups, and a high rate of automobile accidents. It was such a mess that Clark County had a moratorium on development in the surrounding area for many years.

Clearly that has changed. Companies with vision have already staked their claim, or are in the process of doing so. For instance:

- The walls have risen on a medical clinic announced by RSV Building Solutions last fall that includes Creek Side Medical and Cascadia Women's Clinic.
- Community Home Health Services continues in the permitting process to develop their parcel along 134th, and 29th Avenue.
- Manor Care invested \$10 million into a state-of-the-art senior care center at the very western end of 139th Street to take advantage of the proximity with Legacy.
- The Foster family out of Anacortes purchased the University Building, adjacent to Kaiser Permanente on NE 20th last fall in anticipation of increasing demand for office space.
- Startup companies Interject Data Systems and Creative Performance have located in the Northern Star medical complex.
- Life Style Medical Services recently secured space two blocks West of Legacy.

A second spark is the Discovery Clean Water Alliance (DCWA) and the improvements that have occurred at the Ridgefield Junction. The DCWA is an eight-year effort, bringing to reality a 50-year vision on how to solve the sewer puzzle in North County, unlocking the vast potential of open flat parcels that exist around the Ridgefield Junction.

Clark Regional Wastewater District and the DCWA partners are moving steadily forward and anticipate having the pieces in place by 2016 at a cost of around \$25 million. A recent feasibility study indicated this strategic investment could make it possible to site multiple employment centers in North Clark County, potentially creating thousands of jobs. Having such sites available is a critical element in the Economic Development Strategic plan put in place by the Columbia River Economic Development Council in 2011.

The Ridgefield Junction experienced its own multi-phase interchange upgrade over the past five years. With more than \$29 million invested on improving the overpass, expanding traffic lanes and building roundabouts to provide convenient access, the groundwork for growth has been laid.

Additionally, PeaceHealth Southwest Medical Center continues to refine plans for its property. Meanwhile, Clark College has been highly visible in their efforts at locating somewhere in the north county, and most bets are that it will be Ridgefield.

In Battle Ground, more than \$50 million has been spent on the Battle Ground Interchange and the widening of SR-502 into the city's core. Clark County also has plans to extend NE 10th Avenue to the fairgrounds area starting in 2017 – price tag \$32 million. The county views this as a natural extension of the Salmon Creek Interchange Project, tying the economic drivers of both interchanges together.

With two decades of work, we will have created a vibrant, seven-mile-long economic hub anchored by Legacy and WSUV on the south end, and on the north end, the fairgrounds/event center/amphitheater complex at the 179th Street Interchange, and likely PeaceHealth and Clark College at Exit 14. It will include multiple north-south connecting arterials flanking I-5, much of which is already zoned light industrial with users waiting simply for the county to remove an urban hold zone.

The investment in the region for these multiple projects will finalize at just over a quarter of a billion dollars. The projects have been envisioned and managed through multiple agencies and partnerships. While I am certain we'll see continued growth on the east side, the real dramatic changes are going to happen in the north.

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