

# Astoria begins urban park project to help downtown development

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Astoria city officials hope Heritage Square, a multimillion-dollar project featuring a new Chinese garden, amphitheater and festival area, will serve as an example for future development downtown. (Rendering courtesy of MulvannyG2 Architecture)

Ground was broken over the weekend on an Astoria urban park project that could lay the groundwork for future development in the city's downtown area.

City officials hope the project, **Heritage Square**, will become an example of how to handle the area's unique infrastructure system, which is made up of 100-year-old "chair walls" that separate hollow spaces below sidewalks.

"We want to make it so as other projects develop, it won't be as time-consuming and expensive," **Mayor Willis Van Dusen** said. "We're going to hope they can learn from the mistakes we made and what we do right to fix the chair walls."

The city's infrastructure was rebuilt in 1922, after a fire, without streets, pipes or electrical systems. Wider roads were constructed and chair walls were built to provide concrete tunnels for water and gas lines. At the time, not many cities in the Northwest had underground systems for wiring; chair walls were considered innovative.

The walls are now a century old, but Astoria city officials said they have surprisingly endured without many problems. But during preliminary studies for Heritage Square, which will include adding a Chinese garden, an amphitheater and a festival space to a city block downtown, some of the walls around the 25,000-square-foot site revealed deterioration. Officials say this discovery will lead to more construction in the area.

"Because it's a showcase project, we wanted to do our homework," said **Suenn Ho**, senior designer at [Mulvanny G2](#), which designed the project. "We were very surprised how well (the walls) were put together, but the city will take this opportunity to start the whole rebuilding process of the underground system."

Ho said the studies showed that repairing the chair walls would be more expensive than building new ones, and identified which materials the replacement walls should be built from.



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The Heritage Square project was delayed for a few years while officials determined how to construct and pay for the new walls. City officials now believe work can be done in a cost-efficient way.

“If the infrastructure wasn’t so complicated and expensive, we would be done (with the project) by now,” Van Dusen said. “The project has been a very public process and there’s been a lot of exposure on how you deal with chair walls in 2012.”

The project also will demonstrate what type of construction should be done above the walls. Ho said the tests showed that the soil underneath most of the downtown area is poor and made up of debris from the fire; she said this information will help future project developers determine how heavy their structures should be.

The project calls for new sidewalks, which will be built partly out of wood to limit costs and to honor the boardwalks and docks that existed before the fire. After the project is completed, Ho said the city will develop a prototype package for property owners and developers to use as a reference for construction. Because chair walls are connected to sidewalks, which, by city law, are property owners’ responsibility, they will be required to address future maintenance needs.

“How we approach the public right-of-way will become a good reference for other property owners,” Ho said. “It will be a very beneficial testing ground for the city.”

The project’s first phase, expected to finish late this year, will be the Garden of Surging Waves, which will honor the significant Chinese contribution to the city and the Northwest. The amphitheater and the festival space are expected to be built shortly thereafter.

“We wanted to make this block similar to the Pioneer (Courthouse) Square in Portland – Astoria’s living room,” Van Dusen said.

Read more: <http://djcoregon.com/news/2012/04/13/astoria-begins-urban-park-project-it-hopes-will-be-the-blueprint-for-downtown-development/#ixzz2GUNhAYnZ>