

Astoria embraces Chinese legacy

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The Daily Astorian | Posted: Monday, April 16, 2012 10:52 am

Hundreds filled the downtown streets Saturday to celebrate Astoria in every way, shape and form.

The newly renovated Astoria City Hall was opened for the public's viewing for the first time; the Garden of Surging Waves project broke ground in the soon-to-be renovated Heritage Square; and the Liberty Theater began its third and final phase of remodeling.

"This is a very special day for Astoria," said Mayor Willis Van Dusen as the ceremony began.

City Councilwoman Arline LaMear added, "This is just such an exciting day. I've been fortunate enough to visit a couple of cities in Europe that have wonderful squares. And you can't imagine those cities without those squares. And I think that there will come a day when we will look back at this day and think, 'Was there ever a time when we didn't have a Heritage Square in Astoria?'"

"The most important thing we're doing today, I think, is the groundbreaking for the Garden of Surging Waves. This is to honor a group of people who have contributed so much to our city, to our community. And it's about time we honored them."

Veterans, city officials, firefighters, police officers, state Sen. Betsy Johnson, Friends of the Astoria Column President Jordan Schnitzer, U.S. Coast Guard Capt. Bruce Jones of Sector Columbia River, Garden of Surging Waves Designer Suenn Ho and many others came out to celebrate and commemorate the three projects.

Also in attendance was Huo Bao Zhu, owner of the Chinese foundry which did all of the artwork for the Chinese Garden, including donating the bronze monkey lantern, a centerpiece of Saturday's festivities.

Traveling all the way from China, Zhu spoke to the crowd in his native language. Ho translated what he said, as he praised Van Dusen and other members of the city for righting a wrong after so many years, and allowing him the chance to be a part of the project.

He said he would bow to Van Dusen, a rare and honored practice showing the highest level of respect.

Ceremony

Lt. Matt Zedwick, Van Dusen's son-in-law in military uniform, sang the national anthem to kick off the event.

"He's a true American hero. Today, we have Lt. Matthew Zedwick, who was awarded the Bronze Star for bravery in Iraq," Van Dusen explained during the introductions. "He also was the first National Guardsman since World War II to be awarded the Silver Star for bravery in Iraq."

The U.S. Coast Guard helicopter did a fly-over as the National Anthem commenced.

Then, the speeches began while Dr. Duncan Law, who initiated what has become the building blocks of the Chinese garden, was an honored guest.

“What another great day in Astoria,” Johnson said. “What started out with Duncan Law scolding Willis is now turning into one more wonderful movement of Astoria toward being a city in Oregon with such a sense of place, the restoration of old buildings, the Liberty that started the downtown renaissance, and this magnificent garden that is just going to add to the reputation of this terrific city. Thank you to everybody that’s helping make it possible. This is a great day.”

Each of the members of the Astoria City Council, along with Johnson, Jones, Schnitzer and other guests, were give a replica miniature monkey lantern, like the large one Zhu has donated.

Johnson gave her replica to Law, thanking him for his foresight to bring an important issue to the priority list of the city officials.

“Our Centennial, the 100-year anniversary gift was the Astoria Column,” Van Dusen said. “This is the Bicentennial. The Bicentennial Legacy Gift is the Garden of Surging Waves so we can now tell the story of the great contribution of the Chinese pioneers in the Pacific Northwest. This is not Chinese history. This is Astoria history. This is Northwest history. And the Chinese brought the railroad to Astoria, they built the river wall that protects us right this minute from that river. The Chinese put in the sewer system. The Chinese built the jetties at the mouth of the most powerful river in the world. And the Chinese ... worked in all the fish processing plants.

“Twenty-two percent of Astoria was Chinese. Not all of the story is fun to talk about. We have authentic signs that say ‘Any Chinese seen fishing should be shot.’ But we’re not going to ignore the bad parts of our history, either. We’re going to tell the entire story of the Chinese contribution and that’s what we’re doing today.”

The city then strung strands of firecrackers off of the bronze monkey lantern and lit them to mark the official groundbreaking of the garden, while city council members used their official gold shovels to remove a chunk of concrete, perforated by a jackhammer during the ceremony.

City Hall and other events

Then the attention shifted up toward the third story windows of the refreshed City Hall while community members waited with giant scissors in hand to cut the red ribbon and bow that fell to the ground below.

“Rather than talk about City Hall, just go into it, walk around in it,” City Manager Paul Benoit said. “Hopefully, it speaks for itself.”

Hundreds of community members throughout the afternoon climbed up and down the stairs, rode the elevator and browsed around every inch of the new City Hall. From 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., it was a steady

flow.

Then the council met for the first official city council meeting at 3 p.m. to a small crowd.

Don Webb, Astoria's watchdog, was there, front and center. He's attended nearly every meeting for the last several decades.

The celebration itself, aside from the refurbishments and groundbreaking, hosted area restaurants like Fort George Brewery, Van Dusen Beverages, Tokyo Teriyaki, Fulio's Pastaria and more. A kids' booth with popcorn, snowcones and facepainting neighbored the food tables, as well as a bouncy house and sidewalk chalk. The Parks Department also barbecued hamburgers and hotdogs for the crowd.

Each of the day's speakers were given a manila envelope with a golden sealed certificate inside. One thousand certificates with "stock in the block" were available during the event, particularly for those who purchased paving stones for the square. But the 10 with a golden seal can be cashed in for a special gift during the garden's grand opening. That date has not yet been set. However, Van Dusen promised the gift would not disappoint.

Guests of Saturday's block party were also welcome to visit the inside of the Bank of Astoria to share their Astoria story either on paper or on camera for the city's time capsule.

Astoria-born Eileen Thompson chose the paper version to write about her parents, who came to Astoria from Finland. She said she grew up speaking Finnish before starting school. She raised two daughters and two sons in the city and has called Astoria home for 78 years.

Chris Holen, owner of The Baked Alaska, shared his Astoria story on video with his 5-year-old daughter and his father, Jim. Holen said he moved with his wife to Astoria 12 years ago and wouldn't consider leaving because of the wonderful sense of community the city has to offer.