

KATZ OFFERS HER VISION FOR RIVER

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Summary: No longer need others push the city to care for the Willamette, the mayor says

Portland Mayor Vera Katz's call to arms for the Willamette River drew positive reviews Friday, but her proposal to again study removing Portland's "Berlin Wall" -- Interstate 5 -- from the river's east side left some listeners cold.

Katz dropped the usual laundry list of projects for her ninth annual State of the City speech. Instead, she laid out a harsh critique of Portland's treatment of the Willamette and presented plans for improving it.

The Willamette's degradation is the city's "sour legacy," she said.

"We have dammed it and diked it, filled it and diverted it, choked off its tributaries, and paved over much of its watershed, floodplains and habitat. We've used it as a ditch, as a dumping ground and as a sewer and waste conveyer."

Listeners, from Katz's council colleagues to environmentalists to tribal officials, praised the mayor's focus on the river.

"It's very timely because of the long negligence of citizens in the state and the city of Portland," said Don Sampson, executive director of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. "At the same time, it's a long-term vision."

The city faces expensive and mostly unfunded challenges ranging from cleaning up sewer overflows to a Superfund listing of the Portland harbor to dealing with Endangered Species Act listings of wild salmon.

Katz and the two historians who joined her in a packed Hilton Hotel ball room pointed to the city's long history of having to be forced to take care of the river.

"I know I speak for the entire City Council when I declare: The days of Portland acting only after being prodded by others are officially over," Katz said, drawing the loudest applause of the 50-minute address.

How the city will take charge remains a huge question. A \$1 billion city project financed by higher sewer rates has cut overflows into the Willamette and the Columbia Slough. But the federal government has the final say over endangered species and the Superfund listing.

"The question for all of us is what will make these efforts happen," said

Commissioner Erik Sten, in charge of the city's response to the Endangered Species Act. "I hope we can move faster and more boldly with the mayor on these issues."

As for specifics, Katz announced that Robert B. Pamplin Jr., president of Ross Island Sand & Gravel, had agreed to give the Willamette River island to the city by 2004. She also said dense riverside development, including building in the North Macadam area, needs to be at least 100 feet away from the river.

The mayor, who two years ago proposed capping Interstate 405 along the west side of downtown, added another highway project to the list. She proposed setting up an I-5 Options Task Force to consider removing Interstate 5 along the Willamette's east bank or sticking it underground, freeing up 40 riverfront acres.

Sten and Commissioner Jim Francesconi questioned whether that project deserves to be high on the city's to-do list. Francesconi noted that the "Big Dig," Boston's \$4 billion, over-budget project to put a swatch of freeway underground, bodes ill for the idea in Portland.

Removal might be possible "over the next 50 years," Francesconi said. Sten said he didn't have "a lot of energy for another freeway program."

The issue last surfaced in 1993, when a task force recommended removing the freeway and rerouting through traffic to Interstate 405. Commissioner Charlie Hales spearheaded that study, and a council majority favored it.

But there was strong opposition from the Central Eastside Industrial Council, worried about the district losing its hard-hat character, and from the Trail Blazers, who said easy access to the Rose Garden was crucial. Then-Commissioner Earl Blumenauer, now a U.S. representative, was skeptical of the political support for spending hundreds of millions of dollars to remove the freeway.

"What I hear is, 'What are you people smoking in City Hall?' " he said then.

Today, Katz is counting on Blumenauer to carry the issue at the federal level. Friday, Blumenauer said he would try to find federal money to kick start the study, although those dollars are scarce.

Central eastside opposition has thawed since the last effort.

"There's a different mood to the central eastside today," said Rod McDowell, vice president of facility services for the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry and an industrial council board member. "If the money was there, we'd support it."

McDowell said business leaders are wary of turning the area into another Pearl District of high-priced lofts and trendy shops. Connie Hunt, former chairwoman of

the council's board, said the fear in 1993 was that mixed-use residential development would push out industry. But residential development and industry are increasingly compatible, she said.

"From what we're seeing over here, new industry looks an awful lot like office buildings," Hunt said.

Katz's eight-year tenure has been criticized for a lack of vision. Not Friday. City Club member Kurt Wehbring said Katz's speech brought to mind Paris' conversion of old slums into the Champs Elysees.

"Cities change," he said, "and to have a vision of where you want to go really helps you in the long run."

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