

# Problems with New Design of the Mt. Tabor Reservoirs

## 1) What are the plans for “what goes on top” if the tanks are buried?

- A Public Advisory Committee (PAC) met for 9 months to determine the Guiding Principles for the design of “what goes on top.” While the majority of the PAC signed a letter to City Council stating that the burial project should be reconsidered, they did complete their report establishing the principles. Subsequently the Council authorized a design competition. The competition was won by the design firm Gustafson Guthrie Nichol who presented their “showcase” design to the public on October 18, 2002.

## 2) Why are the Friends concerned about the idea of a “showcase” design?

- Most people would like more care and preservation efforts for the present reservoirs honoring their landmark status. The “redesign” has been framed as the reward for acquiescing to the burial plan. Commenting on the winning design, Saltzman said, “I believe a lot of people who have opposed the project will now wonder, ‘What are we against?’” (The Oregonian, Vol 152). In a recent interview with Ron Paul (*Metroscape* Winter 2004), who works in the Bureau of Planning, Portland’s approach to development was discussed. Ron Paul noted that residents are more interested in renovation of historic sites, such as the public library, than they are in building a new one by a world class architect. Because Portland’s landmarks are important to its local residents, he states that “we’re not investing in our community just to be a showcase.”
- The National Parks Service has listed the three reservoirs at Mount labor Park and the two reservoirs at Washington Park on the National Register of Historic Places. Architectural reporter Randy Gragg wrote:

“Few structures so beautifully embody Portland’s relationship to its surrounding natural world than its early reservoirs. Nestled into the folds of Mount Tabor and Washington Park, these grand, concrete cisterns not only store but also honor the city’s most taken-for-granted resource: fresh, clean water from the Bull Run watershed. They were designed and crafted with a care largely lost from the public works projects today... . metaphysically, they are a civic celebration of a fertile pause in our waters’ journey between mountain rains and Benson Bubblers.” (The Sunday Oregonian, 10/13/02)

- Despite these noble words, Gragg and City officials want to have us believe that this is an opportunity for “positive change.” They argue that the winning design by Gustafson, Guthrie, Nichol offers a tantalizing reinvention of the reservoirs linking them through dramatic water experiences. Gustafson was quoted as saying, “There’s great potential at Mount labor... I think Portland will get something much better out of it.” But why should we want something better when we already have the best? Our reservoirs were designed in the celebrated tradition of Frederick Olmstead and should be preserved in function and in form. We believe that the new design will leave none of the reservoirs historically intact and that this “change the wardrobe” mentality will destroy our reservoirs just as they have received their due, the National Historic Register listing.

- Presently, park users enjoy the many facets the reservoirs present throughout all the seasons. Will the proposed water “show” be turned off in the winter months? Will there actually be more safety hazards to the public when the area is re-designed to encourage interaction?

**3) Why should we be concerned with maintenance costs?**

- Montgomery Watson Harza’s memorandum, *Alternatives to Burial Storage*, estimates that maintenance for what goes on top will be equivalent to the current maintenance of the open reservoir. And this was written prior to the design selection which features three water falls, a wading water table, and a water garden. In fact, the estimated costs will be greater, because there will also be costs to cleaning and maintaining the buried tanks.

**4) Will there be mechanical problems (outside of regular maintenance needs) with the newly proposed wading, reflecting ponds and the waterfall features?**

- Water features are difficult to maintain. Imagine the cost of replacing malfunctioning pumps that will be re-circulating hundreds of thousands of gallons daily. Portland is proud of its gravity fed water system because of its low maintenance costs. The new design heads in the opposite direction. Does it meet the sustainability criteria Portland is justly proud of encouraging? And is it safe? Can we be sure that no leakage from the water features will contaminate the functioning reservoirs beneath?
- Portland’s Chinese Garden, which has a miniscule pond relative to the proposed three water surfaces and water falls of the Mt. Tabor Reservoirs, has been unable to stop the leaking at the rate of 272,000gallons a week. Now the city is involved in expensive lawsuits against the architect and subcontractor.

**5) What are the consequences of putting a 22 acre “water amusement park” in the middle of a residential neighborhood?**

- The winning design proposes building a very attractive pedestrian entrance on 60th and an enticing water amusement park that will bring hundreds of new users to the park every day.
- The single bus route (71) that crosses the area is not going to accommodate many of the new users. There is no bus route that comes up Hawthorne to the park since buses are unable to make the narrow and dangerous turn at 60th and Hawthorne. So, the obvious answer for the many new visitors will be to park along 60th or in the adjacent neighborhoods.
- Unfortunately, the most feasible parking area identified by the PAC is off Division Street where the Park’s Maintenance Yard now exists. This option had not been discussed with the neighborhoods impacted. Nor has a traffic study been undertaken. The pedestrian entrance on will not just be local access. Those who drive by the park and see the entrance and waterfalls will naturally want to stop and walk in. New visitors will not necessarily know about “official” parking off Division, nor will they desire to walk the distance with kids in tow.
- If visitors park on 60th they will dramatically increase their own risk and the traffic hazards on 60th~ If they park in the neighborhoods they are going to dramatically increase the thru traffic on the local narrow streets, some which accommodate only one car driving between parked cars. More traffic, more cars, more danger, more congestion, decreased livability to the neighborhoods.
- In either case, those who park in the neighborhoods or along 60th will need to cross the street. The 60th and Hawthorne intersection is not adequate to the present traffic demands. A single stop

sign regulates entrance from Hawthorne. Access is treacherous because visibility is blocked to the south by residential landscaping. The turn is so narrow that the sidewalk corners are chipped and blackened by tire treads. Even at current levels, the traffic can be so intense that wait times for crossing range from three to five minutes.

- If the designers choose to deal with this problem by creating parking in the park on 60th, it will require a major change in the nature of the design and will adversely impact the character of the park. It is likely to be very expensive since they will need to carve a fairly large space out of the side of the reservoir, widen or redesign 60th, and create regulated egress and access. This will have significant impacts on the traffic, noise and pollution on 60th and the surrounding areas. For a city known for its good planning, extensive efforts at traffic calming, and its creative transportation design, why has this obvious problem been ignored?
- By way of comparison, imagine if a private company bought 22 acres of prime land in the middle of a residential neighborhood and proposed an attractive water feature park with waterfalls, wading pools, strolling paths and viewpoints. After the city planning bureau summarily rejected their plan as inconsistent with city land use regulations, they would berate them for not having done a traffic impact study. At least that is the response we would expect. But none of that happened with the current city plans. Not a peep from the planners, not a word of caution from the city, not a single land use hearing. The city has not yet faced the real cost of trying to mitigate the problems the newly designed park will create.

#### **6) What are the costs of the new design proposal?**

- Despite the Water Bureau's estimate of \$13.4 million for the on top design features, Walker Macey, consultant architects to the PAC, estimated the costs could be double that, rising to \$27 million. See the preceding "Costs" section.
- It is instructive to examine the cost estimates for the Tram Project. Figures issued in November 2003 now suggest that the tram between OHSU and the South Waterfront Urban Renewal Area could cost between \$24 million and \$30.2 million, far exceeding the original budget of \$15.5 million. Supposedly the budget confusion was partially due to a misunderstanding that the original budget did not include "soft" costs such as money for design, management and contingencies. But even with that added in, it does not account for the architect's current estimate of \$25 million as a reasonable figure.
- Not included in the budget projections for the reservoir burial project is the relocation of the Mount labor maintenance yards, estimated at \$16.8 million, and the Yards reconstruction at \$8 million or additional water storage costs due to reduced capacity.

**Subsection: Problems with New Design of the Mt. Tabor Reservoirs**

**Appendix**

- A. 03/97. "Portland Open Water Reservoir Study: Technical Memorandum Regarding Significance of the Open Reservoirs to Park Uses," by Murase Associates.
- B. Statement of Opposition — Architects, Designers, Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR), Portland, Oregon