

GIG HARBOR

## Storefront Studio creates vision for downtown block

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Published 3:47 p.m. PT Sept. 5, 2017

Three graduate students and their professor from the University of Washington School of Built Environments spent much of this summer visiting Gig Harbor and creating a plan that could change and enhance an area in the downtown waterfront business district.

The Storefront Studio Project, as the endeavor is called, began in June when the students met with a group of about 50 business owners, residents, members of the Downtown Waterfront Alliance and others for a brainstorming session.

The students took extensive notes as the group discussed issues they feel are important to the community and especially to the historic waterfront area.

This is the second Storefront Studio Project the Waterfront Alliance has sponsored in Gig Harbor.

The first took place in 2013 and included 10 sites along the historic waterfront from the Finholm district to the old ferry landing. This time around, the students focused a single site bordered by Harborview Drive, Pioneer Way, Judson Street and Soundview Drive.

The students envision the site as a potential community hub complete with a village green, live/work “maker” spaces, water features and underground parking.

“Our intent was to sort of generate dreams about the kinds of things that can happen in a space like this,” UW professor Jim Nicholls said. “We’re trying to find the assets of the site — things that are already very good — and make them better. We feel that the community is our client and we have really listened to what people said they want — and don’t want — in this space.”

The No. 1 “Community Goal” was to save mature trees.

Other goals included saving historic buildings, supporting community connections, improving pedestrian opportunities and providing a flexible community space.

Being inclusive and sustainable, supporting local businesses, preserving and creating views of the harbor and increasing the amount of available parking also were listed as primary goals.

“This concept that we have created is our best interpretation of what you as a community told us,” Nicholls said, as he unveiled the students’ concepts to community members who attended the final open house on Aug. 16. “The images are like postcards of what we heard you asking for and supporting with your written and verbal comments.

“We had very interactive sessions with you and you all gave us a wealth of feedback.

“It was a bit of a challenge, but I think we have picked a path to as many people’s goals as possible.”

It’s a site of focused, comprehensive development that helps the entire waterfront realize its natural potential, he added. “It supports and sustains local business, diverse cultures and ecological systems and proposes cooperative community building for positive collective results.”

The students, Erica Cartwright, Arian Van der Kar and Daniel Horrigan call their concept “Harbor Commons.” It would be a place for working, playing, shopping, gathering and exploring.

It’s an open, un-gated space accessible and available to everyone. “It’s not like a fortress,” Nicholls added.

The design protects existing trees and adds more “green space” with a large, open plaza at the heart of the site that could be used for concerts, festivals and other gathering opportunities.

Buildings — including small live/work “makers” cottages where artisans could live, create and sell their products — are scaled to blend with existing homes and other structures.

Van der Kar noted that they “broke the site into three key areas with clever titles referring to Gig Harbor’s commercial fishing history.” Each area is very different, but they all come together into an organic whole, he said.

The place names really mean something, Nicholls said. “The welcome plaza where the car repair shop is currently located, is the “first glimpse of the space.”

“Netshed Row” comprises structures that mimic the shape of Gig Harbor’s historic netsheds.

A building called “The Deck” is located at a prominent corner of the site, according to student Erica Cartwright. “The second story is an open deck — another gathering space with a great view of the harbor,” she said. And the deck is where the captain of the boat hangs out, she added.

Other buildings have front porches, echoing the historic homes that line the waterfront. “The porches encourage ‘porch dialogs’ where neighbors can meet and talk to each other,” Nicholls said.

“Home Port” also has a welcome plaza. “It’s a brick-and-mortar building where makers can use computers and resources to digitally market their wares everywhere in the world,” Van der Kar said. “It also amplifies the fact that these people are the artisans and craftsmen of the community.”

“‘Home Port’ is what Gig Harbor is to the fishermen and the people who live here,” Nicholls said. “And of course ports are what computer people use.”

Horrigan described the onsite parking that provides much additional parking space to support local businesses and visitors. The parking area is a terraced structure with “layers” of parking built into the hillside, with plants and greenery throughout the terraces.

There’s also a water feature called the Rizzo Fountain. Rizzo was a goddess who protected fishermen, Nicholls explained.

In September, the Waterfront Alliance will publish a book describing the entire Storefront Studio concept.

Gary Glein, past president of the Alliance and coordinator of the project, was impressed with the students’ ideas. “I think the scale and focus of the suggestions struck a chord with the community,” Glein said. “There are plenty of decisions for property owners, the city and our citizens to make, but this study gives us ideas and concepts of ‘best practices’ to consider.

“And I was pleased with the positive community reaction to the ideas.”