OMSI District in Portland Continues to Take Shape, Embodying a Changing Central Eastside Neighborhood

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By Jack Stubbs

The Oregon Museum of Science and Industry’s (OMSI) large-scale redevelopment project – located along the waterfront in Portland’s Central Eastside neighborhood – is taking shape.

In mid-August, the Portland Design Commission gave the green light for the undertaking to advance in the city’s Design Review process, with the next Design Commission meeting tentatively scheduled for sometime in October.

According to OMSI’s website, the redevelopment project – dubbed the “OMSI District” Master Plan – will provide up to 1,200 new residential units for individual households, with a minimum of 20 percent of the units being affordable.

The OMSI District will become home. Up to 1,200 new units are planned for individuals and households, with a minimum of 20% of those units being affordable. One of the main tenets of the project is an inclusionary focus on the local community.

“OMSI and its valued partners are working to create an inclusive, vibrant new neighborhood on the southeast bank of the Willamette River in Portland’s Central Eastside,” the museum’s website states.

“The OMSI District comes from a collaboration of local, Tribal and regional government entities, Indigenous groups, nonprofits and businesses. This neighborhood will be built together so we can thrive together.”

Similarly, the vision statement detailed in the OMSI Master Plan emphasizes the placemaking, particularly in relation to the community-facing character that the underway-development hopes to embody. Indeed, OMSI’s project could set a new precedent in the city of Portland.

“A new waterfront education park will honor people and place. It will be the first in the city to restore an urban tribal presence on the Willamette River and create access to the river for all. It will also include public green space, plazas, restored riparian and upland habitats, hands-on outdoor science programming, and interpretation that affirms, sustains, and shares indigenous ecological knowledge and cultural connection to the river,” the organization’s website states.

The in-progress development, which would undoubtedly add much-needed housing inventory to Portland’s residential market, likewise has a fascinating history supporting the endeavors that inform the project’s character to date.

Over the last several years, the project site has witnessed a significant change in uses, with the neighborhood of which it is a part in an ongoing state of fluctuation.

“The evolution from classic heavy industry to a low-density postindustrial mixed-use zone characterizes the rest of the Central Eastside as well; it is a neighborhood in a state of change. However, there are still active industrial enterprises in the Central Eastside Industrial District, and these are highly prized for the jobs and enterprising spirit they bring to the central city,” the Master Plan states.

In terms of next steps, it is not entirely clear how and on what time frame the OMSI District redevelopment project will advance. Although, the Portland Design Commission’s recent approval of the latest project plans do bode well for its future outlook. Throughout 2022, the project team will look to work with partners and the city on funding strategies, which create the framework for a development agreement with the City.