



Port City Turns Into a Glass Blowing Haven

Tacoma, Washington

The City of Tacoma, Washington was once a premier coastal port of the Pacific Northwest. Now its main waterway, the Thea Foss, lays vacant and underutilized because of perceived contamination from past maritime activities. However, through the efforts of the city and EPA, and with significant private sector financial support, Tacoma is turning the land adjacent to the Thea Foss into a residential, commercial, and cultural public esplanade.

The City of Tacoma was founded in 1884 and thrived both as the lumber capital of the world and a maritime port. There were many uses for the land along the waterway: truck storage, coal bunker operations, and a heating oil distribution center. However, after the city's timber and port activities relocated due to a shift in the market, Tacoma suffered economic decline and unemployment rates began to rise. The Thea Foss Waterway fell quickly into disuse—while perceived contamination and liability risks rose.

The city purchased the 27-acres on the waterway in 1991, and by 1995 had started the clean up process of the uplands; it could now focus on coordinating redevelopment efforts of the land adjacent to the Foss, as it is known to residents. A Brownfields Assessment Demonstration Pilot award to the City of Tacoma from EPA in 1996 increased the likelihood that the Thea Foss Waterway would eventually be revitalized. The city and the Pilot worked together to form the Thea Foss Waterway Public Development Authority (PDA), whose mission was to oversee and guide all Pilot activities. The PDA took control of the land from the city in 1996. Pilot activity focused mainly on starting the revitalization momentum and helping the city market the land along the Foss. In total, the Pilot assisted in leveraging the \$63 million needed for initial redevelopment activities on the Foss, the majority of which came from local and private sources.

The privately constructed Museum of Glass International Center for Contemporary Art, which opened in July 2002, was conceived in the mid-1990s as the first step of an impressive waterfront renewal plan devised by the PDA. Inspired by the Tacoma native and renowned glass artist, Dale Chihuly, and carried out by the museum's director and the architecture firm designing the museum, the idea culminated in the \$63 million structure, whose four-story cone is a landmark for travelers and residents as they enter the city. The 1.6-acre museum site consists of an exhibition studio, café, five outdoor installations, a gift shop, and a "hot



The Chihuly Bridge of Glass.

JUST THE FACTS:

- In total, the Pilot assisted in leveraging the \$63 million needed for initial redevelopment activities on the Foss.
- Within the first six months of operation, more than 185,000 visitors came to the museum, contributing \$17 million to the local economy.
- The museum and bridge have been called "an explosion of color" by the New York Times and "spectacular" by the Los Angeles Times.

The new museum and the bridge have showed the world "where we are and how far we have come."

*—Bill Baarsma, Mayor
City of Tacoma*

shop” where the public can view the processes of glass blowing and cutting. The Pacific Northwest is the heart of glass country in the United States, and the museum is a perfect fit for the city.

The museum was not enough for Chihuly; he wanted to create something for Tacoma that no other city in the world had to offer, something that was full of color night or day. The result is the Chihuly Bridge of Glass, which opened concurrently with the museum. Spanning 500 feet over Interstate-705 and a rail line, the bridge enables pedestrians to access newly redeveloped areas along the Thea Foss Waterway by connecting the waterfront with downtown Tacoma, which is also undergoing significant renovation. The bridge is the largest permanent outdoor glass installation in the world, featuring the Crystal Towers, two 40-foot tall towers of blue ice-crystals; the Seaform Pavilion, consisting of over 1,500 seaforms (glass sculptures that take the appearance of abstract sea creatures); and the Venetian Wall, a glass enclosed case with 109 works of glass in the Venetian style. The Tacoma Brownfields Pilot assisted in leveraging the \$12 million needed for the construction of the bridge, from both private sector and state sources.

Initially, museum marketers questioned whether anyone would come to Tacoma, a city with a reputation as Seattle’s poor, blue-collar cousin. However, both the museum and the bridge have become instant successes. Within the first six months of operation, more than 185,000 visitors came to the museum, contributing \$17 million to the local economy. Tourism agencies in nearby cities cannot keep up with the demand of people that want to travel to Tacoma. The museum and bridge have been called “an explosion of color” by the New York Times and “spectacular” by the Los Angeles Times.



The Museum of Glass ceiling.

In addition to the museum and bridge, the Pilot assisted in leveraging funds for the \$35 million Thea’s Landing redevelopment project, a mixed commercial and residential building that opened in the Fall of 2002. Thea’s Landing now has 188 residential apartments, 47 condominium homes and 431 parking stalls. In addition, the Albers Mill development, the Albers Transient Moorage, and the Foss Waterway Marina have all been completed and two other museums have opened at the opposite end of the Bridge of Glass: The Washington State History Museum and the Tacoma Art Museum.

However, development along the Foss and in downtown Tacoma is far from complete. Three other major mixed-use projects incorporating condominiums, hotel, and office space are being developed along the waterfront around Thea’s Landing. The redevelopment has also created new residential areas in downtown Tacoma with many former warehouses being converted into condominiums. This redevelopment has prompted additional building renovations and a light-rail transit system for Tacoma.

Bill Baarsma, mayor of the city said that the new museum and the bridge have showed the world “where we are and how far we have come.” Currently, Tacoma’s biggest problem is not how to revitalize its blighted and disregarded areas, but rather how to handle all its visitors.

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