

Wonders of Water (WOW!) at The Old Fire Hall

THE CONCEPT: Mully Mullally, Tom Lindsay, and Lynn Willeford are exploring the idea of creating in the old Langley Fire Hall an interactive play/educational space focused on the wonders of moving water, much like the water exhibit at the San Jose (CA) Children's Discovery Museum created by a team led by Tom. In the endlessly fascinating exhibits, visitors of all ages can both watch and control the movement of water in various ways--creating their own water sculpture, using head-pressure to blast plastic balls into the air, suspending the balls on a 10-foot high laminar stream of water, and designing their own riffles and eddies in a stream. A large water wheel, a 300-gallon vortex tank and a mist-filled water bell round out the exhibit. The very youngest children easily spend an hour or two pouring water in and out of various containers and putting balls into their own vortex and laminar fountains. The water is continually filtered and sanitized, and re-circulated in the exhibits.

We plan to make WOW! At the Old Fire Hall better and more sustainable than the exhibits in San Jose, using an improved water-treatment method, more recycled materials, more volunteers to design and build it, and more of a goofy South Whidbey feel. This experiential South Whidbey community project located in Langley will be like nothing else in the region (or the country).

WHY THE FIRE HOUSE? It's perfectly situated in the heart of downtown, creating repeat traffic by locals and visitors. It has a sloped cement floor, space for the water system, and a very cool tower with unlimited possibilities for dramatic water features. Public parking is nearby. The front doors open in good weather for bubble magic and other fun. We would start with the front half of the building in about 18-24 months, and perhaps expand to the back if/when that becomes possible.

HOW DOES IT FIT WITH THE LANGLEY COMP PLAN? It's going to be artsy, educational, fun, and uniquely South Whidbey. This idea fills 7 of the Mayor's

Top 10 priorities, and the main points of the Economic Development section of the revised Comprehensive Plan. The project is grounded locally, using local talent, recycling a central Langley feature, and using interactive exhibits to demonstrate in fun and compelling ways the nature of water movement on and around Whidbey Island. WOW! will provide a moderately priced, exciting destination for repeat visits by locals, non-locals, families, groups and classes, as well as some employment.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS. We envision WOW! as a self-sustaining nonprofit supported by memberships, visitor fees, group fees, special events, rental of the space for parties, and perhaps some retail items. But we will need to raise funds through grants, sponsorships, events, businesses, and individuals for start-up costs. We anticipate that some changes might need to be made to the structure to meet ADA or water purification requirements.

NEXT STEPS. We need to do more research to make sure this idea is financially and physically possible, but Debora Valis, Patricia Friedman, Jeff Landel, Julie Buktenica, Valerie Twomey, Frank Jacques, Chris Spencer, Randy Hudson, and Dave and Jill Campbell have already expressed interest in working with us. Our goal is to build enthusiasm, support, and a sense of ownership by involving as many students and adults in the planning and building process as possible.

The creative team will study the Fire Hall space and start planning the interactive exhibits and working mechanisms, then move to scrounging the parts, and putting together the structures with volunteer help. We'll be pulling together volunteers with experience in building, engineering, art, crafts, water systems and other areas of necessary expertise. The business team, meanwhile, will find a 501 (c)(3) umbrella and explore mutually advantageous partnerships with the City, Parks & Recreation, the Port, the school district, other nonprofits, and perhaps Americorps. They'll get a firm grasp on potential costs and income and create a budget, before moving on to applying for grants, raising start-up funds, and deciding on hours and staffing.