



WHAT'S THE STORY ABOUT.....?

How the Chambers Creek Properties Came To Be:

It did not just happen, and it was not an accident! It seems like every fascinating place, structure or work of art has an amazing story behind it. The name, Chambers Creek Properties came about in 1994 largely as a way to capture the myriad of individual pieces of land owned by Pierce County along the Creek and the Bay under a single title. The long and colorful history of those individual pieces is told on our [History](#) page This section relays the “how and why” story behind the Properties and the original 1997 Master Site Plan that has resulted in the wonderful public assets we enjoy today.

Before the 1997 Master Site Plan – a quick tale of four owners! Pierce County is the “single owner” of the 930 acre Chambers Creek Properties, but it is not really that simple. Depending on the source of the money (Fund) used to obtain a given piece of property, the Fund is the “owner”. Each Fund has specific fiscal and legal restrictions under State law. The creation of the Chambers Creek Properties and adoption of the Master Site Plan incorporated these restrictions and enabled the Properties to be managed and developed as a single cohesive unit.

County Road Fund: Pierce County first began operations at the Properties in the 1950s with the development of a County Road Shop and gravel mine on 30 acres where the Environmental Services Building (ESB), the playfields and U.P. School District bus barn (sold in 2013) exist today. Following incorporation of the cities of Lakewood (1995) and University Place (1994), the County Road Shop was relocated into central Pierce County, and the Sewer Utility Fund purchased the Road Fund’s parcels.

County General Fund: In the mid-1980s, portions of the Chambers Creek Canyon began to be acquired and donated to protect this unique, wooded canyon and creek area from overdevelopment. Additional parcels in the Canyon continued to be obtained until the early 2000s. Deed restrictions based on lawsuit settlements, donations, state and federal grants, and other purchase conditions further assures that the Canyon can only be developed for trails, open space and limited public recreation. The County’s ownership in the Canyon is now nearly 200 acres (both General Fund and Sewer Utility Fund).

County Sewer Utility Fund: The Chambers Creek Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant began operations on a small 44 acre portion of the former Lone Star Northwest Gravel Mine in 1984; and, eight years later, the County Sewer Utility Fund purchased the remaining 650 acres of the entire mine, including large portions of the lower Canyon and Bay.

County Stormwater Utility Fund: The City of University Place Public Works shop is located on a former portion of the Properties and Master Site Plan. The County Stormwater Utility purchased this small site from the County Sewer Utility years before and eventually sold it to the City after incorporation.

Today, there are only two “owner” funds, the County General Fund and Sewer Utility Fund. Chambers Bay Golf Course is a tenant on Sewer Utility property, not an owner.



Finding the Vision! By the early 1990s, all four of these “owners” were separately looking at long-term plans for the use and development of each of these pieces. These individual decision-making processes needed to meet the legal and fiscal requirements of their respective funds, and that would have been the normal way to proceed. Fortunately, all four were also using the services of the same County employee to facilitate these planning processes (now Foundation Board Emeritus member, Joe Scorcio). In addition, a handful of key County staff and elected officials had some different thoughts and together found a common Vision. As a result, the unified Chambers Creek Properties and the Master Site Plan began to take shape on paper in March 1994. There were many parents of the Vision, including County Executives, department heads, and many key staff members responsible for those funds. By working together on a single Vision, amazing things have resulted.

It has always been about Wastewater Treatment! The Sewer Utility Fund carries the most legal and fiscal restrictions because of the permanent nature of wastewater treatment and the massive financial investment in infrastructure (pumps, pipes, treatment facilities, etc.). Beginning in the 1970s, Pierce County began embracing innovative water and wastewater management practices. These practices serve to improve the quality of life, quality of water and public health in every community served. In addition, the County Sewer Utility is in the wastewater collection and treatment business forever. This shapes the way the money must be spent, and the timing and scale of construction projects. The Sewer Utility has been repeatedly recognized nationally as a leader and model program in the best and proper management practices.

Pierce County purchased most of the Chambers Creek Properties parcels in order to have the land onto which they could permanently build, expand, buffer and protect the wastewater treatment facility. The reclamation of the former gravel mine industrial site and its transformation into a public recreation area under the Master Site Plan is designed to achieve these underlying financial and practical restrictions. This permanence and stability are key positive long-term aspects of the Properties.

The long-term plan for the two gravel mines is to use waste water treatment by-products to reclaim the mines and return them to biological productivity. Wastewater treatment by-products such as biosolids, when combined through composting and similar processes, create “manufactured soils” (SoundGro) which can be used for mine reclamation and many other beneficial uses. Treated wastewater can be “reclaimed” by using it for irrigation and by creating water ponds for advanced and tertiary treatment. Such re-use of by-products transforms them from waste products in need of disposal into valuable resources which can be used for a variety of productive purposes.

The Master Site Plan is premised upon the permanent ownership and operation by the Sewer Utility to achieve both the operational needs of the Utility for treatment, and for the buffering of the surrounding communities from these non-stop 24/7 operations.

The Legacy of County Executives Stortini and Sutherland! County Executive Joe Stortini, who served from 1985 to 1992, supported initial efforts to secure both the canyon and the gravel mine properties. Both goals were difficult to achieve, and required strong Executive leadership to accomplish. The Sewer Utility's 650-acre purchase from Lonestar NW in 1992 for \$43 million triggered the creation of the Chambers Creek Properties. It also led to development



of the Master Site Plan in 1997 to govern the mine reclamation and site restoration around the Treatment Plant expansion, which also enabled consideration of “other compatible public uses” (a condition of the purchase). The 2018 completion of the \$350 million expansion of the Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant further demonstrates his lasting legacy to Pierce County.

The next County Executive was Doug Sutherland, whose term of service was from 1993 to 2000. County Executive Sutherland proved to be the strategist that the Properties needed to insure the future. In 1994, Executive Sutherland embraced the proposal to create a single unified Master Site Plan for all 950 acres of the County’s holdings in the Chambers Creek area. He required the four affected departments to work together as a single team to develop an achievable and sustainable plan that they could and would implement. The Master Site Plan for the Chambers Creek Properties, as regularly updated, is designed to guide what happens on the Chambers Creek Properties indefinitely.

Each parcel of the Chambers Creek Properties was purchased by Pierce County for a specific purpose at a different time. The two overarching premises of the Master Site Plan are to operationally combine the Properties into one integrated site, and provide for a balance of required government services, public access opportunities, and revenue generating uses (to offset some of the costs of public access)

As a result of Sutherland’s leadership and business approach, the Chambers Creek Properties became a reality, and the Master Site Plan became a nationally award-winning project and role model for public development. He delivered on his commitment to get supporting votes for the Plan from the County Council (7-0), Lakewood City Council (7-0) and University Place City Council (7-0), not an easy task.

In 1999, Mark Kahley (Foundation Board Emeritus member) and other local citizens, who had been involved in the development of the Master Site Plan, chartered the Chambers Creek Foundation.

The Planning Begins! When Pierce County decided to create a Master Site Plan for the entire Chambers Creek Properties, it was realized that public involvement would be critical to ensure that the site would serve a wide variety of public needs and meet the overarching premises of integrated planning, management and operation, and a balance of compatible uses.

The public involvement process was uniquely designed to be both general and focused. Outreach was accomplished through a variety of means, which included both general County-wide notification and information programs as well as specific outreach to adjacent communities and residents. Hundreds of stakeholders were identified and invited to participate in the process to determine the best uses of the Properties’ resources.

To guide the planning process the County Council created a Citizens Committee of 13 appointed residents, and a 62-member Resource Team with representatives invited from business, environmental groups, local, state and federal agencies. Between August 1995 and May 1997, the Citizens Committee and Resource Team, together with thousands of Pierce County citizens, spent many hours thinking and talking about the Chambers Creek Properties and working to prepare the initial Master Site Plan. Executive Sutherland endorsed the Plan as recommended by the Citizens Committee and Resource Team, and the three Councils agreed.



The unique planning process had extraordinary outreach including focused workshops, scheduled and drop-by appointments, surveys and many hand-on opportunities. Thousands participated throughout the process. Completed in an era before social media, the planning process mailing list reached nearly 6000 at its peak. The unique planning process also won numerous state and national awards. In 2004, the American Planning Association conferred the Chambers Creek Properties and Master Site Plan their National Planning Award for Parks and Public Lands (it's the Oscars and Emmys!).

The Legacy of County Executives Ladenburg, McCarthy and Dammeier! Once the initial planning was done, the gradual transformation of the Chambers Creek Properties began. Based on an extremely conservative funding approach (assuming very limited outside dollars) it was estimated that full implementation of the Master Site Plan might take 50 years. The Foundation formed to help bring outside dollars to the Properties sooner and to make things happen. The Foundation's efforts and success to date can be found on our [Accomplishments](#) page. The Foundation is not the only source of outside dollars obtained by Pierce County along the way. In just over 20 years approximately 60% of the Master Site Plan has been implemented.

A major reason for the movement forward was County Executive John Ladenburg. His term of service ran from 2001 to 2008. When County Executive Ladenburg came into office, he brought two messages to the County's development team. The first was that he wanted to accelerate many of the public access projects, particularly completion of the Grandview Trail, the Soundview Trail, the Central and North Meadows, and the Bridge to the Beach. His second message to the team, to the entire County and perhaps the entire world was that the golf course that was in the approved Master Plan needed to be something special.

A few years later, the Robert Trent Jones II (RTJ) team was under contract and Chambers Bay was being built. Executive Ladenburg's greatest contribution was the proverbial kick in the backside that moved many of the great ideas in the Master Plan into real projects that everyone could enjoy now, and not have to wait until someday. With our city, regional and state government partners, KemperSports Management, RTJ team, Washington State Golf Association, and a multitude of supporters, the United States Golf Association (USGA) was convinced that Chambers Bay was capable of hosting championships. The 2010 US Amateur and 2015 US Open are by far the biggest events so far. Executive Ladenburg's legacy, however, is not these events; it's his demonstration of will, and his dogged belief that you have to risk failure to secure success. Each day thousands of people enjoy the Properties because Executive Ladenburg and his predecessors pushed when others would likely have backed away.

County Executive Pat McCarthy, whose term of service ran from 2009 to 2017, had to complete many of her predecessors' projects and commitments, including the very successful 2015 US Open. These were not small tasks, and really required huge efforts behind the scenes so that when the world came to visit in 2015, they would have an amazing time. With the help of a quarter million golf fans, Pierce County and Chambers Bay delivered. Executive McCarthy was able to open the discussion about the next phase of development of the Properties, and that may prove to be her biggest contribution after all: the resort hotel and related facilities.



The largest community-based project on the Properties, facilitated by Chamber Creek Foundation, the massive Playground by the Sound was completed in 2012. The Foundation subsequently provided some remaining funds for the addition of adjacent picnic shelters and a public art display (A girl and her dog).

Bruce Dammeier became County Executive in 2017 and is still in office as of this writing. A second 10-year review of the MSP was finalized in 2017 and he recently secured a ground lease with a developer for the development of a hotel and related facilities. Additional work is progressing on Chambers Creek Canyon trails and bridges. His legacy is still being written, but like the four Executives that went before him, there is plenty to be done.

What's in the Future? The 930-acre Chambers Creek Properties have been transformed since Judge Chambers staked his claim at the mouth of Chambers Creek 150 years ago. What was once a forested 250-foot bluff above Puget Sound became 2 miles of gravel mines. More than 100 years of intensive mining in one of the largest mines in the United States and other industrial uses created a barren wasteland. Chambers Creek Canyon had been logged repeatedly since the 19th century, while in recent years, second and third growth forests have returned. Now the Properties are undergoing a dramatic yet gradual second transformation. The Chambers Creek Foundation intends to remain partners with Pierce County and the communities as this transformation continues over time.