

# *From Below the Bottom Up:* **Enhancement Reclamation Spotlight on the Columbia Tech Center**



By Libby Morrison

**THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPT OF** sustainability usually conjures images of peaceful flowing streams, the sound of leaves rustling in a gentle breeze and pangs of longing for a deep breath of fresh mountain air. However, the essence of “sustainability” does not stop at preserving nature. The “Triple Bottom Line” of sustainability is a more holistic model, which champions long-term environmental, economic and social health. These three pieces fit together like a Venn diagram and acknowledge the integrated and complex nature of sustainability. The Columbia Tech Center in Vancouver, Wash., satisfies this Triple

Bottom Line notion of sustainability and fully deserves its time in the Enhancement Reclamation Spotlight.

The Columbia Tech Center is a master-planned, mixed-use development located in Vancouver— at least, that’s what the website says. And while the online portal is very accurate, it leaves out what the Columbia Tech Center was: a quarry. A quarry that has undergone incredible enhancement reclamation. Over 400 beautifully paved and landscaped acres of new offices, retail shops, luxury apartments and a vast array of community amenities from a medical center to a college campus and a 12-acre park with an amphitheater, now sit where



sand and gravel materials were once extracted to build the literal foundation of the community.

The vision behind the Columbia Tech Center was spurred by the eastward expansion of Vancouver toward local aggregate mines— which were historically located outside the city’s population center— and local need for aggregates. Pacific Rock Products (now Lehigh Hanson) initially approached Tektronix about purchasing 80 acres of land for mineral extraction that the tech company would be vacating as they moved their workforce across the river to Oregon. Tektronix declined and instead sold the property to a development group, CTC Investments (now close partners with PacTrust). Pacific Rock Products was undeterred

by their previous purchase attempt and approached the new owners as well, but this time, with a unique community-forward plan.

Pacific Rock Products proposed to extract the valuable sand and gravel resources and pay CTC Investments royalties that would create a fund for future development of the site. Following extraction, the land would also become the home of that same future development, albeit, sixty feet below the original grade. Not only did the development company recognize the value in this collaborative venture, Clark County officials also saw the wisdom and logic in the approach and issued permits that allowed the partnership to ultimately result in today’s Columbia Tech Center.

“It’s a great example of how creative thinking can meet a number of different needs,” said Bruce Chattin, Executive Director of the Washington Aggregates & Concrete Association. Sand and gravel are scarce in Clark County, and through Pacific Rock Products’ plan, one patch of ground provided these resources, helped pay for— and host— a valued community hub that is still growing, and made it all happen in just a few years because construction followed right behind the mining.

The coupled extraction-reclamation plan created a win-win-win scenario for Pacific Rock Products, CTC Investments/PacTrust, and the entire community. The Columbia Tech Center project demonstrates how the Triple Bottom Line of sustainability can

be achieved through enhancement reclamation, as it bolstered environmental, economic and social wellbeing throughout Clark County.

Had the Columbia Tech Center been built as planned, prior to Pacific Rock Product's proposal, material would have been transported to the project site. However, material transportation and associated emissions were significantly reduced because the aggregate resources were produced on-site. The development itself is also environmentally friendly. Features range from native landscaping, including a newly installed raingarden and wildlife habitat, to various businesses that have earned environmental certifications – LEED Platinum and "Salmon-Safe" among them.

The Columbia Tech Center currently has over 100 businesses representing a wide range of industries, including education, financial, hospitality, medical, residential, retail, food services and more. These places not only provide jobs for Clark County citizens today and into the future, but provided work during the mining, planning and construction phases too. Furthermore, by using sand and gravel resources from literally across the street to build the Tech Center, the county saved an extraordinary amount of money because transportation is the greatest cost when it comes to aggregates. The farther it travels, the more expensive a project.

Finally, the social benefits of the Columbia Tech Center may be the most far-reaching of all. The variety of business, education, living and recreation amenities hold appeal to a diverse population of individuals at all stages of life. The planning process, too, engaged the community and promoted integration. "This project highlights the importance of relationships at the community level – elected officials, neighbors, people with the county and state – and having a dialogue and being able to address concerns before people even bring them up," said Chattin.

The Columbia Tech Center is a true posterchild of enhancement reclamation and sustainability. It supplied and

utilized local non-renewable aggregates, created a unique community jewel and inspired a mutually beneficial aggregate-community partnership.

Mining does not have to be adversarial. Rather, as demonstrated here, it can be a catalyst for communication, engagement and progress; it is time to start recognizing and promoting mining and reclamation as an opportunity. Perhaps if we start looking for reasons *why* to accomplish something, rather than *why not*, we will create more Columbia Tech Centers,

and foster environmental, economic, and social sustainability. ■

*Libby Morrison completed two Master's degrees at Oregon State University focusing on the enhancement reclamation of aggregate mines. She is the sole proprietor of a small mediation and facilitation business, Phase Vision, in Eugene, Ore. She is a writer and active education and outreach advocate for the aggregate industry. Libby is the Environmental Services and Land Use Coordinator for Wildish Sand and Gravel.*

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