

How Tacoma Became Leaders in Public Power in the PNW

By Jeff Ryan, Tacoma Architect

The history of Tacoma's power system is well-known in the power industry, but relatively unknown by the general public. Its impact on the nation's power system is something that has been over-shadowed by larger projects and passage of time. The Cushman Power Project serves as an important example of how a small act can have wide-ranging benefits beyond limited cities. While a project of this size has both positive and negative impacts, we will cover the good rather than the bad in this article.

Tacoma's power and water system started in 1893 when the citizens of Tacoma purchased a system started by Charles Wright and General Sprague in 1884. Unfortunately, the city bought a lemon, but it slowly improved the system, with time taken to construct a dam on the Nisqually (1909-1912), and a steam plant on Dock Street (1922).

But, population growth rapidly outpaced reliable electrical power to produced to serve the demand. The city had to rely on power from additional private sources to meet the demand, namely Puget Power and Rail, a company that routinely changed power rates, and caused brownouts by selling to other cities and towns willing to pay more than Tacoma. By 1917, Tacoma residents had had more than enough of private-power monopolies, and in 1918 they voted to fund an assessment of other possible sources for electrical power for the city. The Skokomish River at Lake Cushman was chosen as a preferred site, having been assessed by the City of Seattle but abandoned due to a lack of transmission lines to that city.

Site-clearing and engineering started in 1920 and a ballot measure was put before the Tacoma voters in 1924 for a four million dollar bond to fund the project - after the measure passed the City Council by a single vote.

The measure was approved by the public by a 2 to 1 margin, even after an advertising and political push by Puget Power to try to discredit the project. Thus, the Cushman Dam project, like the Nisqually project, was ***funded by the people of Tacoma a full ten years before the Federal government got into the power and reclamation business.***



The project, as approved, included a dam and power house at Lake Cushman, 44 miles of power lines from the Hood Canal to Tacoma, including the longest unsupported power line in the world at the Narrows.

The eastern terminal of the system was at the Cushman Substation on N. 21st St.; additionally, there were three smaller substations to distribute power to the North and Central areas of the city. Cushman Lake, west of Hood Canal, became the eighth-largest man-made reservoir in North America at the time of its construction.

The Cushman power project was finished in less than 26 months, by virtue of crews working day and night. **When it was done in May of 1926, the project had come in underbudget and had cost less than half of what a comparable, privately-funded project available at the time.** Continued on page 4

With the completion of the project Tacoma had the lowest power rates in the nation and became fully independent from private power sources. The project also produced enough to supply other municipalities from Mason County to Seattle and generate a profit of \$50,000 per month, allowing the city to pay off the bonds by July of 1940. With the cheap power came more industry on the port and the need for a second dam on the Skokomish that started power operation in 1931.

The impact of the Cushman Power Project stretched beyond our city, proving the worth of public power and validating its champions.

Homer T. Bone was an attorney in Tacoma and an outspoken advocate for public power as early as 1907. He was also the attorney for Tacoma City Light and the Port of Tacoma leading up and through the Cushman Project. Based on his lectures and support for public power, H. T. Bone was elected to the US Senate in 1933, and the next year co-authored a bill establishing the Bonneville Power Administration, based on the success of the Cushman Power Project.

The engineers that came from across the west coast, like J. L. Standard, Chief Engineer, who offered to work for a third the going rate just to be on the project, went on to play leading roles in both the Bonneville Projects on the Columbia and the Tennessee Valley Authority. The TVA even based its power rates on Tacoma's progressive method of charging industry more to lower the rates of homeowners.

One engineer, a Tacoma native and Stadium graduate, Alvin Darland, became the Superintendent of Electrical Design and Construction for Cushman, and went on to be the Chief Construction Engineer for Grand Coulee, and later the Superintendent for Grand Coulee.

The Cushman Project served as a guiding light for other Public Power Projects that followed and helped to regulate the cost of power in the U.S. as an alternative to the private power monopolies. The Northwest Public Power Association notes Homer T. Bone as the "Father



of Northwest Public Power" and issues an award in his name each year.

The Cushman Substation is the public face of this important project in our history, reminding us of values of those who came before us to make the city a better place to live and work.

Let's Re-purpose Cushman Sub-Station for Public Use

The buildings, the main one facing N. 19th, between Adams and Washington, and a small one on N. Washington, are on the Tacoma, the Washington, and the National Registers of Historic Places. Currently, the "Friends of Tacoma's Cushman Substation," an organization of volunteers who want to see public use of this unique property, is working to encourage future **public use** of the property. The group favors adaptive re-use of it, in honor or those from Tacoma's past who envisioned public power as a benefit to the city and its citizens. The group would like to see the site used as a neighborhood park and the buildings used as a community center for all ages, but focusing on the needs of seniors, preschool children and the arts.

If you would like to support the "Friends of Cushman Station" in their quest for public use of the Cushman Substation, visit their site on Facebook at "Friends of Tacoma's Cushman Substation" for more information.