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An Insider's Look at Seattle's Backyard

Follow along as our team of editors, writers, and designers explore the communities we report on

By South Sound staff | October 29, 2019



Photos by Kate Orum

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Sunday Brunch is Back at

The [Seattle Southside Regional Tourism Authority](#) (RTA) invited staff from *South Sound* and *South Sound Business* magazines to, as RTA's tagline reads, "Explore Seattle's Backyard," and we came away Friday with appreciation for how much is going on within the cities of Des Moines, SeaTac, and Tukwila.

RTA's role is to strengthen travel and tourism in the Greater Seattle region in partnership with the three cities, said Katherine Kertzman, RTA's president and CEO, who kicked off our tour with an introduction to the organization, its history and mission, destination video, and a summary of the impact of travel and tourism in the jurisdiction. Seattle's Southside packs quite an economic punch, we learned, hosting the second-highest concentration of hotel rooms in the state, about 9,000 (with more under construction), and 4 million-plus visitors last year who spent more than \$771 million.

From there RTA's offices near the Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center, we boarded one of RTA's blue travel vans for a guided tour of the city trio. Along the way, RTA's Ashley Comar, vice president of marketing and communications, shared local facts, including more than 5 million square feet of southside retail and vast dining options reflecting the area's cultural diversity. By the way: The tallest building in Tukwila? The Hotel Interurban, she said.



President and CEO Ben Oliver outside of Starfire Sports in Tukwila.

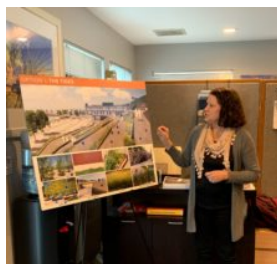
Our first stop was [Starfire Sports](#) in Tukwila, a sprawling indoor/outdoor complex spanning 54 acres. While used largely for youth and adult soccer, Starfire also hosts rugby, lacrosse, flag football, and more, said Ben Oliver, president and CEO. Starfire is the official training facility of the Seattle Sounders FC professional team, and Starfire's 4,500-seat stadium is home to the Seattle Seawolves pro rugby team. We learned Starfire is more than kicks and tackles; it also offers a STEM Academy to, according to its website, "ensure equitable opportunities and access to programs that inspire and empower participants to develop STEM-enabled knowledge, skills, and mindsets."

This writer liked learning about "walk soccer," one of Starfire's sporting options. "There's no running and no contact," Oliver said, a nice feature for older players or those recovering from injury.

Tony Hettler, president of [Destination Des Moines](#), a volunteer role he's held the past 11 years in addition to owning and operating John L. Scott Real Estate Des Moines, hopped aboard the van with us at Starfire on our trip to Des Moines to update us on the city's many family-friendly events, from its popular farmers market on the waterfront, to car shows, art and wine walks, and an annual fireworks extravaganza.

"This is what we get to sell," Hettler said upon arriving at the city's marina district, waving toward normally dramatic views of the Puget Sound and Olympic Mountains that were obscured Friday by thick clouds and rain.

The waterfront, with its large marina, is the focus of a major development plan geared toward creating a local, regional, and international destination. Plans anticipate a boutique hotel, restaurants, new public gathering spaces along the water, and improved public access — perhaps future ferry service and enhanced connections between the marina district and downtown. The city expects to seek



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"We're pretty excited," Susan Cezar, chief strategic officer for the city, said in reviewing marina district development concepts guided with public input. "We want to create this as a destination."

Chief Strategic Officer for the City of Des Moines Susan Cezar walks us through a rendering of marina development concepts.

Another fun fact: Des Moines is a huge diving destination, among tops in the state, Cezar said, noting projects to improve divers' access. "There's just a lot of good stuff to do in Des Moines."

From there, we headed to the [Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center](#), where hotel manager Richard Scherzinger hosted us for lunch at Spencer's, which focuses on Pacific Northwest fare featuring quality competitive with top eateries in Bellevue or Seattle. We fared well by the hotel, which treated us to a starter that included Neah Bay black cod and a Dungeness crab cake, followed by an heirloom tomato and buratta caprese salad, an entrée featuring Double R Ranch bone in beef tenderloin, all capped by a dessert of berry crisp and Lopez Island Creamery vanilla bean ice cream. It was Pacific Northwest delicious and a restaurant discovery that locals might want to add to their dine-out bucket list.

Oh, and a great place to visit outside the Hilton, according to Scherzinger: Highline SeaTac Botanical Garden, a place the hotel often directs activity-seeking guests. "It really is beautiful," he said, another gem in Seattle's backyard.



Neah Bay black cod and a Dungeness crab cake appetizers at Spencer's in the Hilton Seattle Airport and Conference Center in SeaTac.

TAGS: ASHLEY COMAR, BEN OLIVER, CITY OF DES MOINES, CITY OF SEATAC, CITY OF TUKWILA, DOUBLE R RANCH, HIGHLINE SEATAC BOTANICAL GARDEN, HILTON SEATTLE AIRPORT AND CONFERENCE CENTER, HOTEL INTERURBAN, KATHERINE KERTZMAN, LOPEZ ISLAND CREAMERY, RICHARD SCHERZINGER, SEATTLE SEAWOLVES, SEATTLE SOUNDERS, SEATTLE SOUTHSIDE REGIONAL TOURISM AUTHORITY, STARFIRE SPORTS, SUSAN CEZAR, TONY HETTLER

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