

TRAILBLAZERS

HOW A COMMUNITY SAVED ITS MOUNTAINS

Thesis Exhibition Project by
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FRAMING

Issaquah History Museums (IHM) is a historical society in Issaquah, WA, a former mining and lumber boom town which has evolved into a fast-growing community near the edge of the Cascades. Our thesis project involves the creation of a new exhibit for IHM at the historic Depot Museum. Our exhibit, *Trailblazers: How A Community Saved Its Mountains*, showcases the environmental history of this city, one surrounded by a trio of forested peaks poetically known as the Issaquah Alps.

The Issaquah Alps draw Issaquah's residents and visitors alike. The availability of nature and wildlife so close to home maintains a deep connection to the city's culture. A local connection to the natural world is shown to benefit mental health and a sense of belonging among residents (Buta et al., 2014). Yet, many Issaquahans are unaware of the efforts that have ensured that the mountains and their second-growth forests continue to recover from the community's early days. This disconnect between awareness and appreciation is an opportunity for IHM, which is looking to establish more relevance in the community through focused messaging on curating a hopeful future, not just a preserved past. To tell this story, IHM relies on a strong foundation of exhibit design to reinvent their image.

PURPOSE & IMPACT

The broader purpose of *Trailblazers* is to help IHM reinvigorate their role in their community through a greater emphasis on environmental history and the successes of grassroots activism. A front-end evaluation survey validated our belief that potential visitors enjoy and value the Issaquah Alps while also lacking context on the efforts taken to ensure they remain undeveloped.

As a free museum which serves as a staple of Issaquah's downtown attractions, the depot mainly targets a casual audience of Issaquahans, both new and long-time residents. We intend for this audience to gain new awareness of the efforts to conserve the Issaquah Alps, in the process developing a greater connection and appreciation of the land. The exhibit is meant to inspire pro-environmental behavior both in Issaquah and elsewhere in the country, as visitors envision themselves as potential agents of change.

REFLECTIONS

Throughout this project, we and our partners at IHM have developed a new understanding of intentional, solutions-oriented exhibit design, which will serve the museum well the next time the exhibit space needs a refresh. Exhibit design always comes with challenges and opportunities to overcome said challenges, and Trailblazers was no exception. The exhibit space is a small historic waiting room which requires natural lighting and carefully-maintained walls, and there were few collections objects available as centerpieces. Our design took these limitations into account and created workarounds, such as free-standing wooden display stands and an emphasis on evocative photographs in our panel graphics.

Trailblazers is a testament to IHM's ability to secure community partners for the exhibit's fabricators and sponsors. This exhibit gives IHM a reliable template to expand beyond its service as a historical society. It can also inspire other small history museums looking to establish relevance within the constraints of minimal space and budget. Issaquah History Museums is now able to prove itself as an active participant in the town's fate, conserving not just the past, but also the present and future.

DELIVERABLE

Our finished exhibit, *Trailblazers*, will continue to energize the Issaquah Depot Museum's main exhibit space over the course of several years. Trailblazers reveals the story of the Issaquah Alps through 23 text panels, 13 display stands made from repurposed wood, 2 interactive stations, and 2 display cases containing historic trail signs and public guidebooks.

Major themes include:

- The development of Issaquah as a community reliant on resource extraction and its effects on the Issaquah Alps, the Snoqualmie tribe, and Euroamerican settlers.
- Milestones of conservation and land management on the three main peaks which make up the Issaquah Alps: Squak, Cougar, and Tiger Mountains.
- Important individuals responsible for bringing these milestones into reality, highlighting 5 key figures.
- The origin of major local environmental engagement organizations such as the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust and the Issaquah Alps Trails Club.
- How to identify native plants of the Issaquah Alps.

REFERENCES

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PROCESS



Front-end evaluation survey distributed at Issaquah community events, designed to understand public perspectives on the Issaquah Alps.



Researching and drafting the exhibit's narrative and object selection.



Developing the exhibit's physical layout: the number and arrangement of wooden display stands to hold text panels.



Developing the identity of our panel designs: text, colors, photos, and graphics.



Developing interactive elements: native plant section and visitor talk-back board.



Deinstall of previous exhibit, install of Trailblazers, and the grand opening on April 23rd, 2026.