



## Googling Kirkland

**By Peyton Whitely**

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The last time 1,000 people worked at one company in Houghton, they were building minesweepers at a shipyard along Lake Washington.

That was more than 60 years ago during World War II, in a town that long ago was swallowed by Kirkland.

So having a business come in with that many workers is kind of a once-in-a-century deal.

The effect may be even more profound this time around because of the business. It's Google.

By early next year, some 195,000 square feet of offices along Sixth Street South, on the site of a former Navy depot and door company, will be occupied by Googletes. They will move into three office buildings in a campuslike setting near downtown Kirkland between Lake Washington and Interstate 405.

The development is expected to have major impacts on both the city and the region.

"There are going to be several hundred well-paid people coming to town," said Andy Loos, development manager for SRM Development, which developed the Google property.

But the implications of Google's expansion go far beyond numbers of workers, said Ellen Miller-Wolf, Kirkland's economic-development manager.

"It's a really big deal," she said. "It's a change in the way of thinking about Kirkland."

Google's move is a transformative step toward the city's own vision of being a community where people can work, live and play all in the same place, she said, and where people walk more and sit in traffic less.

"Most important in the future of a city like Kirkland is driving foot traffic and downtown activity," said Dave Despard, an IBM vice president and member of the Kirkland Downtown Association. "Our biggest push is to attract and retain this level of employers and employees to the downtown."

The city already has taken steps toward that goal in developing high-density housing, she said. The number of multifamily housing units in the central business district jumped from 39 in 1995 to 1,170 in 2007.

Evidence of Kirkland's evolution is visible at restaurants like the Purple Cafe and Cactus, both within easy walking distance of many downtown businesses, including Google and Bungie Studios, where the "Halo" games of Xbox fame were developed. The restaurants fill up with a jeans- and shorts-clad crowd for lunch and dinner.

### **People-friendly outlook**

All that suits Google just fine.

Peter Wilson, Google site manager in Kirkland, says the decision to grow in Kirkland came in part because the city matches the company's inclination toward low-rise buildings and informal, people-friendly environments.

"Kirkland kind of fits," he said, noting that he lives along Lake Washington Boulevard and commonly walks to work.

The company has said it plans to keep an office in Seattle's Fremont neighborhood — where 75 people work in engineering and 25 in sales — but also allow employees to live and work on the same side of Lake Washington, forgoing cross-lake commutes.

On a recent tour of Google's existing Kirkland offices, Wilson points to rooms filled with pool tables, video games, free food and even massage stations. It's all intended to create a workplace where people want to go and where they can be creative and collaborative, he said.

The new complex will even have a rock-climbing wall.

Inside, people work in teams, sitting close together, easily able to trade ideas. Even Wilson's office is just a desk sitting next to a window alongside Central Way, behind a video-game screen, looking out at a tire shop.

"We don't have corner offices at Google," he said.

### **Site a lucky accident**

Google in Kirkland almost didn't happen.

The company opened its Seattle-area engineering office in 2004 with two people in Kirkland. That number grew to the current 400, housed across from the Kirkland Post Office.

That growth generated lots of talk about where Google might grow next. Kirkland city officials and others worked to keep the business in town.

Around the same time, a partnership had acquired a 7.2-acre site in Houghton — a former city of its own that now is part of Kirkland — with plans for a 70-unit housing development, recalled Loos.

A rezone request came before the City Council in early 2005, on the same night that a controversial proposal to develop a downtown parking lot was on the agenda. The parking-lot proposal was rejected, and City Councilman Tom Dillon left the meeting in disgust. Minutes later, the housing rezone also failed, on a 3-3 vote.

"If Tom had lasted another 15 minutes, it would have been residential on that property," Loos said. Dillon confirmed that he would have voted for the rezoning.

Instead, the housing partnership fell apart, and SRM bought the property.

"Seven acres in Kirkland doesn't come up very often," Loos said.

In August 2007, Google announced it would be moving to the Sixth Street South site. It won't say exactly how many people it intends to employ there.

It took possession of the new buildings this month and will spend the rest of the year getting them ready for occupancy early next year.

