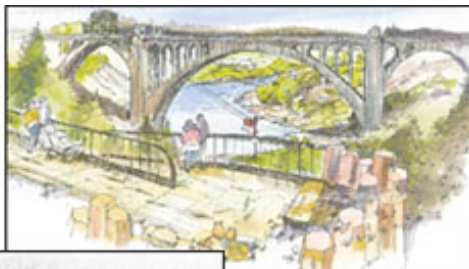


Park advocates court business

Friends of the Falls says river project would bolster economy; Spokane Tribe will seek \$5.5 million center at Salty's

By [Megan Cooley](#)



Above, a drawing of a trail and viewpoint in the proposed Great Gorge Park shows the sort of project that the park proponents would like to see developed along the Spokane River west of downtown. At left, the Spokane Tribe of Indians plans to propose soon building a cultural center at the site of the former Salty's at the Falls restaurant near the Post Street Bridge. In the \$5.5 million project, the tribe would remodel the building there now and build two structures later to house a restaurant, dance hall, gift shop, and museum space.

A citizens group here says it will need to win support of the business community as it seeks to spark development of a proposed park on a largely undeveloped urban stretch of the Spokane River west of Riverfront Park.

The group, Friends of the Falls, hopes to raise money from corporate sponsors, individual donors, grants, and local, state, and federal coffers for the 100-acre park, which would provide important new links between Spokane's glistening river and its neighborhoods and business districts.

In its recently unveiled 2003 Business Plan, the group says that while it's important for it to remain grassroots and community based, rather than focused on business interests, it increasingly must "engage the business community to secure" the funding and political pull it needs to meet its goals.

The group says it plans to "develop and refine the case for the Gorge Park as an economic-development driver including, but not limited to, smart growth, investment attraction, downtown revitalization, and tourism."

Its plans also include supporting the development of Metropolitan Mortgage & Securities Co.'s long-proposed Summit development on the north bank of the river between Monroe and Maple streets.

Meanwhile, the Spokane Tribe of Indians plans to propose soon renovation of the city-owned former Salty's at the Falls restaurant building, at 510 N. Lincoln, into a cultural center that would celebrate and teach the histories of Inland Northwest tribes, says Bryan Flett, the tribe's heritage coordinator.

The Spokane Tribe would remodel the former Salty's building and erect two new structures there in a three-phase project that would cost about \$5.5 million, Flett says. He says a Seattle architectural firm already has designed the complex, which would include a dance hall, a gift shop, museum space, and a restaurant that would serve traditional Native American foods.

"Huge rewards"

Plans for the park, which tentatively is being called the Great Gorge Park, already have made an impression on some in the business community.

Michael Edwards, president of the Downtown Spokane Partnership, calls the proposed project "an economic-development driver" for Spokane.

"It's a relatively modest project in terms of dollar amount, with huge rewards," says Edwards, who envisions the park as a recreation corridor.

He says the park would provide opportunities for young entrepreneurs to build "outdoor-adventure companies" there that offer such things as kayaking. "This could position Spokane as a younger, active place."

Edwards envisions that the park could draw tourists who might stay downtown, take a kayak tour of the river, then walk back to their hotel. "By the time you get back to the Davenport (Hotel), you're still wet," he muses.

Kim Pearman-Gillman, the city's economic development adviser, says the proposed park could complement efforts that developers have been making to rejuvenate the city's core.

"We are an historic-preservation city," she says. "If we could take that approach to the river, it will bring economic growth with it."

Rick Hastings, executive director of the nonprofit Friends of the Falls, says that the park, which would include bike trails, picnic areas, and river access for fishers, kayakers, rafters, and other outdoor enthusiasts, could become a symbol of Spokane, attracting tourists and new businesses here.

The park would span the river from the Lower Spokane Falls downstream past Peoples Park, Hastings says, adding, "All the land we need for this is already in public hands. We're talking about making the most of what's there." He says the city of Spokane owns most of the property that would be in the proposed park.

To be sure, the organization is a long way from having secured sufficient funds to build the park. Through membership dues, state-planning grants, donations, and other resources, it has raised \$369,000. Hastings has no firm figures on what the park would cost, but estimates the expense of building main components of it would total \$5 million, not including the tribal plans for the former Salty's location.

Most of the work would involve building trails, visual-access points, and pedestrian and vehicular paths and streets between the park and surrounding areas, including Browne's Addition, the West Central neighborhood, the Summit property, North Spokane, and downtown. One link would provide access to the Lower Falls. Ten links are planned in all.

Hastings says he isn't able to spell out when the various projects—such as construction of a staircase descending from Riverfront Park to the river—would be completed.

The city of Spokane, backed by the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce, is seeking \$300,000 in state funds to pay for a proposed master plan for the park and \$200,000 to build a trail near the park's west end. The Legislature has yet to appropriate the money, but if it does, the planning effort would take one to two years to complete, says Gavin Cooley, Friends of the Falls' chairman.

Hastings says it hasn't been determined whether the park would become part of the city, county, state, or federal parks system. Some of the park's areas could be developed and maintained with private money from surrounding residents, perhaps through a tax-increment financing district or in conjunction with a private development project, he says.

"We would answer that in the master plan," Hastings says. "The Spokane parks department has expressed that it's stretched to the limit" and wouldn't want to be given an unfunded mandate to maintain a big new park, he says.

Cooley says it's possible that some pieces in the park's conceptual plan could be built soon. For example, Paul Green, an outdoor recreation professor at Eastern Washington University, recently studied the viability of a kayak park within the Great Gorge Park. Green, who volunteered his work, says that such a park could draw three kayaking events a year to Spokane and generate an economic impact of about \$300,000 in its first year and \$900,000 in its second. With his students, Green designed a layout for a kayak park, which would include picnic tables, other park amenities, and placement of sandbags in the river to create a kayak course. Cooley says that project, or others like it, could be developed even before a master plan for the park is completed.

Already under construction is a trail on the north bank of the river from the Summit property to tiny Veterans Court Park near the Post Street Bridge. That trail is being excavated under the Monroe Street Bridge as part of the two-year renovation of the bridge, Hastings says.

The Native American cultural center also could go ahead even before the master plan for the proposed park is completed, Cooley says.

Fugazzi Inc., of Spokane, leases the former Salty's building now for a catering operation. Dave Mandyke, the city's deputy director of public works and utilities, says that Fugazzi's lease expires Aug. 31, and the city will request proposals for future use of the property before then. Several restaurants, including Alberta, Canada-based Cheesecake

Café, have expressed interest in leasing the site, he says.

"We're looking to maximize our return on the structure," Mandyke says, adding that he's unable to comment on whether the tribe's plan would accomplish that. The city has yet to receive a formal proposal from the tribe, he says.

Flett says the cultural center would be called "Snweymn," which means "a place where spiritual offerings are given and received" or "the falls of the rapids." A trail or staircase would be built between the cultural center and the river.

The stretch of the Spokane that winds through the downtown area was a center of commerce for Inland Northwest tribes for thousands of years, Flett says.

"We still consider this home because of our spiritual connection to the area," he says. "We appreciate the city and the Friends of the Falls for finally recognizing what they have in front of them."

In their advocacy of the park, Friends of the Falls is trying to bring to fruition an idea that is almost as old as Spokane. Early-day landscape architects Fredrick Law Olmsted Jr. and John Charles Olmsted, who had much to do with setting up Spokane's park system, identified an area for a "Great Gorge Park" almost 100 years ago.

The proposed park would closely resemble the Olmsteds' plan, Hastings says. It would encompass the High Bridge Park area at its southwest corner, and eventually extend to Riverside State Park at its northwest corner. The park would have "soft" edges, rather than definitive boundaries, he says. It would include the Peaceful Valley neighborhood without changing any homes or structures there, and it would leave a lot of land untouched, treating those spaces as natural conservancy areas.

Green growing green

Several U.S. cities have bolstered their economies by enhancing rivers or other bodies of water in their urban areas, Cooley says. In San Antonio, trees were planted and walkways were built along a mile-and-a-half stretch of the San Antonio River to transform the downtown. More than 20 pedestrian bridges also were built across the river, as were stairways that connect the river walkway to the city's streets.

That River Walk project was developed around 1940 and enhanced for the World's Fair in 1968, says Karen Kubena, a spokeswoman for the San Antonio River Authority. Today, outdoor cafes, shops, bars, art galleries, and hotels line River Walk, which is the No. 1 visitor attraction in Texas, beating out even the Alamo, says Angela McClendon, a spokeswoman for the San Antonio Convention and Visitors' Bureau.

Other park and water-enhancement projects have been carried out with similar economic success in Providence, R.I.; Boston; and Chattanooga, Tenn., the Trust for Public Land says.

"In other cities, it's all about reclaiming cement and putting up lampposts" to attract people to water, Cooley says. "Not here."

Although the park here would be a looser configuration of trails and natural space that would give visitors access to the river, it also would attract businesses, young families, and tourists here, park supporters contend. Trails and staircases would allow people in the downtown area, at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, and at other points to wind their way down to the river and onto the park's trail system.

Meanwhile, achieving one of the park proponents' prime goals this year—closing the so-called "westlink gap" in the Centennial Trail—appears to be assured. The Washington state Parks and Recreation Commission is expected to call for bids this month for a \$1.8 million, 800-foot-long bridge that will span the Spokane River between Summit Boulevard and Riverside Avenue, says Kay Turner, executive director of the Spokane nonprofit group Friends of the Centennial Trail. The project is expected to get under way this summer, she says.

Friends of the Centennial Trail had raised \$1.6 million for the bridge and was struggling to scrape together the balance when C. Paul Sandifur Jr., chairman of Metropolitan Mortgage, announced last month that he would donate \$172,000 to the project.

The bridge, which will be named the Sandifur Memorial Bridge in memory of Metropolitan founder C. Paul Sandifur Sr. and his wife, J. Evelyn Sandifur.

Cooley says he expects to see more such projects—that blend well with Friends of the Falls' concept for the proposed

park—evolve over time. “It’s a very organic process,” Cooley says. “We’re setting up the infrastructure so other groups can step in and do ...what the community wants to see.”

Boosting values, confidence

Edwards says the Great Gorge Park’s links to surrounding neighborhoods have the potential to increase property values in those areas.

“As the edge between open space and development becomes sharper, the value of each goes up,” he says.

Cooley says that if property values were to increase in the West Central neighborhood, for example, homeowners could refinance their homes and use that money to repair and improve them.

“There’s no direct access to the water now,” he says. If the park were created, “The neighborhoods will interact all along it in a natural way. The valuation of the real estate is going to go up, and the neighborhood will feel it. That’s an immediate benefit.”

The proposed park also could change how the city views itself, Cooley says. If it’s done right, the park could act as an ambassador for the city and also be something residents here identify with, he says.

“The project could fundamentally change how we view ourselves,” Cooley says. “When people understand that, good things start to happen. They start to have more confidence in the city.”

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