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## Gorge Park can bolster community, business



Businesses like civic projects that deliver the biggest bang for the buck, and park lovers pine just as deeply for preservation of the finest open spaces. The idea of developing a Great Gorge Park on the Spokane River serves the desires of both groups well.

Downtown Spokane Partnership President Michael Edwards calls the proposed park "a relatively modest project in terms of dollar amount, with huge rewards." The project has much potential to make Spokane more livable while bolstering the economy here.

Noted designer William McDonough has called the Spokane the most beautiful urban river in the world. Yet, because the river gorge west of downtown isn't very accessible, most people who live here have never seen parts of the river there. To float those sections is to experience incomparable beauty in an urban setting.

A Great Gorge Park stretching from Lower Spokane Falls downstream beyond Peoples Park, as proposed by the nonprofit group Friends of the Falls, could provide access to this long-neglected treasure in a sensitive way, so the river's beauty would be highlighted, preserved, and enjoyed by residents and outsiders.

Inland Northwest tribes once used the Spokane as a fishing grounds and a gathering place. The salmon runs are gone, but the river still can serve as a gathering place for hikers, fishers, floaters, and those who merely want to view its beauty.

If a Great Gorge Park is developed, the culture of the tribes could be honored with signs and an interpretive center on the Centennial Trail, which has yet to be extended through the gorge. We were glad to learn that the Spokane Tribe is close to proposing a multi-tribal cultural center on the bluff overlooking Spokane Falls where the former Salty's at the Falls restaurant operated. Such a center could honor the region's tribes and be an educational and recreational attraction. Others have proposed uses there, and we hope that our elected leaders will make a wise choice on the future of the site.

The city of Spokane is the largest landowner in the proposed park area. The Parks and Recreation Department has set aside \$10,000 in planning money this year for the Great Gorge project, Director Mike Stone says. The Park Board is uncertain what should happen with the project—with some members believing that because the park could have a national impact, it should be developed by the National Park Service, Stone says.

The department's budget is tight, and it has a long list of other priorities, but Stone says almost no opposition has surfaced to a Great Gorge Park so far. "Conceptually, it's a wonderful project. It's got more warm fuzzies than any other project I've ever been involved with."

The next step should be to prepare a master plan of the proposed park, so the public can see where the boundaries would lie. The Washington Senate included \$250,000 for the plan in its budget, and the House included \$300,000, or the full cost, in its. We hope the money is appropriated.

Friends of the Falls estimates that it would cost roughly \$5 million to build 10 viewpoints and access points. Avista Corp., which is seeking to relicense its Spokane River dams, supports the project, although it hasn't pledged any money for it yet. Federal funds might be available for facilities that honor tribal cultures.

Since the amount is relatively modest, we think the thing to do might be to create the park with or without much initial investment, gain the advantage of adding another attraction to our community, then develop the park in stages.

It's time for our community to turn one of its most valuable, but heretofore underacknowledged, natural treasures into a showpiece for all to view and appreciate.