



# JOURNAL OF BUSINESS

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## Our economic future: A river runs through it

A recent business forum at Gonzaga University said it again: To succeed, Spokane must understand what it does best, and it must trumpet those qualities.

The fact that this advice seems simple or obvious doesn't diminish the truth of it. What parent or mentor hasn't advised along the same lines? We all understand that in life, success follows knowing who you are and making the most of the natural gifts you possess. Cities are no different.

But what is it that makes Spokane unique? Using current jargon, what's our regional "brand?"

From the very start of our civic history, experts have said it over and again: It's the river.

The sons of Fredrick Law Olmsted, the acknowledged founder of American landscape architecture, said it in 1908, when they urged Spokane to establish a "Great Gorge Park" capturing the river shoreline. A 1961 master plan for the city said it again, envisioning an accessible "greenway" along the entire urban shoreline. Community leader King Cole and others drove home the point while championing the largest single event in our community's history, Expo '74. Even internationally renowned "green architect" Bill McDonough, who has traveled much of the globe, recently called our river "the most beautiful urban river in the world."

This is great news for Spokane, especially in today's emerging economy where quality of life, recreation, and scenic amenities drive success. As with our universities, our downtown, and our historic neighborhoods, what we need to succeed may already be here—lacking only definition, recognition, and development.

Follow the river: From its origins at Lake Coeur d'Alene, along protected shoreline through a fast-maturing sister city, past projects such as the Mirabeau Point development, the river serves as a unifying conduit for new growth and cross-border civic pride. Past the Spokane Valley, into the heart of Spokane, where Washington State University, Eastern Washington University, Gonzaga University, and the Spokane Intercollegiate Research and Technology Institute share strong growth potential near the river's edge.

Closer yet to the downtown core, Riverfront Park frames the river, and acts as a civic centerpiece and gathering space. Emerging Great Gorge Park plans suggest, at long last, a celebration of the picturesque Lower Falls, and transition from urban shoreline to something more rural, peaceful, and from a tribal standpoint, sacred—

the onetime tribal salmon fishing grounds below the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture. Farther downstream, the river takes us past miles of beautiful shoreline, one day perhaps connecting Great Gorge Park to Riverside State Park, already the second largest such park in Washington.

The river—our celebrated river—ties all of this together, and can be a catalyst for much more, if we just connect the dots.

What's needed? First, imagination and vision. We have to see the opportunities, and determine to invest in them over time. Cast

in this light, the river then could form the basis for community and project alliances that also could (imagine this) bring us together.

So framed, shoreline regulations would pay dividends as contributions to a scenic and treasured corridor. Cleanup, where needed, could be seen as leveraging a broad-based community strategy. Tribal interests could be celebrated as part of an inclusive, dynamic history. Even the current relicensing of hydroelectric facilities on the river could offer us a rare opportunity to refine the balance between scenery and utility.

With state and federal budgets as tight as they are, we're in no position to build an economy from scratch. It's our good fortune that what others seek also happens to be what we have in spades. A focused plan, overlaid on current opportunity, amended by incremental investment, could yield a sustainable, marketable resource that would not only improve our own lot, but that of our children—who, by the way, might be more inclined to stay in a city so endowed.

Famed author and environmentalist Ian McHarg once remarked, "The fish will be the last creatures to discover water." Because the beauty of our landscape is everywhere—literally as the background for our lives—we take it for granted, and have difficulty seeing it clearly.

It's time for our region to see what others see when they visit, what others have told us from the beginning, what we have that few others have, what may sustain us if we sustain it. It's time for us to discover the true power of our river.

**Rick Hastings is executive director of Friends of the Falls, a local nonprofit group that is working toward development of the long-envisioned Great Gorge Park.**

*Submit proposed guest commentary to Editor, Journal of Business, 429 E. Third, Spokane, WA 99202, or e-mail them to editor@spokanejournal.com.*

### GUEST COMMENTARY

**RICK HASTINGS**