

Spokane is following a nationwide trend to turn its river into an amenity that can draw whitewater enthusiasts and dollars

Making waves

Group pushing whitewater park wants to follow the successful formula other cities have used

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Shortly after the whitewater park in Reno, Nev., opened, a bridge overlooking the Truckee River received a new moniker. The Arlington Avenue Bridge now is commonly referred to as the "Fanny Bridge," because drivers traversing it see a row of rear ends as spectators lean over to watch kayakers playing in the river below. The park was instantly successful when it opened last spring, offering kayakers, canoeists, tubers and boogie boarders access to a series of pooled drops and standing waves stretching over 2,600 feet of the river. City estimates show the park draws at least 100,000 users annually, boosting hotel night stays, tax revenues and additional commercial development.

"The use is just unbelievable," said Steve Frady, spokesman for the city of Reno. And, he added, "We're only a year into it."

Now Spokane is hoping to tap into a piece of that action.

Following a \$400,000 appropriation from the Legislature this year, and months of private fund-raising, the Friends of the Falls plan to begin construction next summer on a whitewater park in the Spokane River at High Bridge Park, just west of downtown. The organization is preparing to request proposals from several national firms that design whitewater parks, said Steve Faust, executive director of Friends of the Falls.

"When we get the proposals back, we will have a better idea of how much it will cost," Faust said. "What you need to do is think — people are going to come to the river, and how are you going to manage that? What facilities are you going to make available without making something really intrusive? That's the intent."

Spokane is following a well-tested trend that's building nationwide. Whitewater parks have been around since at least the 1970s, but the number of projects is escalating and they're growing in magnitude. Charlotte, N.C., is planning a \$21 million whitewater park featuring three channels of recirculating whitewater on 277 acres just outside the city. The city of Golden, Colo., reaps an annual economic impact of \$1.4 million from its whitewater park, according to one consultant's study.

"Our company alone has built over 40 of them already in this country, the vast majority in the last five to eight years. We have 18 projects under design right now in six or eight different states," said Gary Lacy, president of Boulder, Colo.-based Recreation Engineering and Planning, which began building whitewater parks in 1983 and did a preliminary feasibility study for Spokane. "It's just an enormous surge."

Over the past decade, Lacy said, people have become more aware that the rivers and creeks flowing through their towns



Pro kayaker Nick Troutman from Canada, in mid-flip during the second-annual Reno River Festival at Wingfield Park and in the Truckee River whitewater park earlier this month. Friends of the Falls is planning to begin construction of a whitewater park near High Bridge in Spokane next summer. (Photos by Scott Sady/Reno Gazette Journal)

Spokane RiverFest

The Inland Northwest Trails Coalition and Friends of the Falls will hold the "Spokane RiverFest" on June 11 at High Bridge Park from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The event, which will include music and speakers, food vendors and outdoor-gear demonstrations, will be a community celebration of the Spokane River's ecological, cultural and economic importance.

are "an amenity, not a liability." At the same time, participation in all types of kayaking grew 135 percent from 1998 to 2003, according to the Outdoor Industry Association. Paddle sports alone — including rafting, canoeing and kayaking — account for about \$680 million in annual retail sales, the association reported.

"It is definitely growing in interest, and people who are going are going more often," said Mike Lee, the association's marketing and communications manager.

And, it appears, many other people are interested in watching boaters surf through the waves.

Whitewater parks are created by inserting natural or manmade obstacles into a riverbed to channel the flow. The obstructions, including boulders or concrete formations, create waves and pools for boaters to do tricks and maneuvers. Spectators line shores and bridges to watch, in addition to picnicking and hiking along the riverbanks. Whitewater parks also host events, such as freestyle competitions, slalom races and river festivals.

Lacy's initial report said developing a whitewater park at the Sandifur Bridge would cost about \$425,000, Faust said. The state appropriation wouldn't cover all of that, so private fund-raising began. The effort has collected about \$30,000 so far, with a goal of \$45,000, Faust said.

The region's paddling community signed on with enthusiasm and in three months raised \$16,000. The biggest chunk of that — \$4,750 — came from the Spokane Canoe and Kayak Club, said Mick French, a Spokane kayaker heading up the fund-raising.

"I just see this not only as a benefit on a strictly selfish level for me to go play, but as a really great recreational renewable resource asset to Spokane," French said. "I think it's gonna get done."

For Spokane, the golden ring is an estimated annual economic impact of \$2 million to \$3 million from visitors and tourism, including "land development and increased commercial investment adjacent to" the whitewater parks, according to Lacy's report. Other cities that have built whitewater parks have reported commercial development nearby, an upsurge in traffic in downtown shops and multiple night stays in hotels.

"It's pretty amazing to see in the summertime. There is just a ton of activity along the creek, everything from people using the creek to people strolling along the trails," said Sabrina Henderson, communications manager for the city of Golden, Colo., which built a whitewater park in 1999 and expanded it in 2002 when use exceeded expectations. "It's really added a lot of vibrant recreational activity to our city."

The city already had walking trails along Clear Creek, which runs directly through downtown Golden. But adding the whitewater park, Henderson said, made people stop and stay, rather than just pass through. The city of Golden footed the \$340,000 bill to build and expand the park, Henderson said.

Spokane's feasibility study identified other sites on the Spokane River that also would work well as whitewater parks. If the initial park is a success, other sites could be developed in the future, Faust said. Those other potential locations include Glover Park, just upstream from the Sandifur Bridge; at Post Falls downstream of the dam; and rapids near Sullivan Road, Flora Road and Harvard Road in Spokane Valley and Liberty Lake.

Development of any whitewater park, however, involves balancing different interests, including access to the river through residential neighborhoods, Faust said. So for now, the Friends of the Falls group is focusing on the Sandifur Bridge site.

And the site is prime for a park, Lacy said. It already has a designated parking area with restrooms. It has a flat area on the north bank that would be ideal for visitors, picnickers and spectators. And the river gradient there is sufficient to create a wave or other hydraulic features necessary for a whitewater park.

Though the requests for proposals have not gone out yet, the working plan is to build two U-shaped structures into the riverbed at its natural grade just downstream of the bridge, Faust said.

The structures would channel the flow into consistent waves on both sides of the river while simultaneously creating a natural pool for fish habitat, according to Lacy's report. The waves would be designed to be suitable for boaters of all skill levels.

One drawback of the High Bridge Park site is that it's not in the middle of downtown Spokane, Lacy said. Visitors to Reno can't walk through that city's downtown without tripping over the whitewater park, he said.

A smart way to connect downtown Spokane with the park, he said, would be to develop a pedestrian trail leading along the river to the park.

Developing additional trails along the river is part of the master plan for the 400-acre Spokane River Gorge. The whitewater park is an initial step in a long-term vision that includes interpretive and cultural centers, connections to existing trail systems and enhancements to parks along the riverbank.