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Gorge Park could boost economy

The longstanding dream of a Great Gorge Park below the Spokane Falls -- and a century qualifies as longstanding -- has become more reachable now that it is augmented by an economic-development component.

By itself, the idea of preserving and showcasing one of the city's most striking geological features has considerable aesthetic zip.

Throw in the potential for investment and job creation and it could develop the energy needed to overcome immediate economic obstacles.

The Spokane Park Board avoided program cuts or personnel layoffs in 2004 only by spending its budget down to zero. That leaves the board in precarious shape if unpleasant surprises occur. It's not a time for taking on new maintenance responsibilities.

The gorge concept dates at least to 1908 when noted park designers, the Olmsted Brothers, outlined a master plan for Spokane. If their proposal can be shown to enhance economic vitality, it becomes more feasible in uncertain budgetary times.

It helps that plans exist for a mixed-use development on the north bank of the Spokane River below the falls. If they proceed as scheduled, it would be a significant westward extension of the city's landscape.

That would balance the current and projected development at the east end of downtown Spokane, which is being beefed up with the renovation of older structures, expansion of the Spokane Convention Center and in time, creation of a bustling university district east of Division.

From an urban planning standpoint, it's important to keep the city center in the center of the city -- the hub of the wheel.

The Gorge Park, coupled with eventual completion of the

Centennial Trail, adds up to a compelling attraction for convention-goers.

The river channel affords a natural corridor to Riverfront Park -- a gateway to the shopping and dining experiences of the core -- and to the natural, historic and archeological wonders beyond.

Spokane has features that distinguish it from so many blah city centers.

The more the community capitalizes on that, the more we make the kind of impression that brings convention-goers back and helps thriving businesses attract desirable employees.

For the Gorge Park dream to be realized, real-life challenges have to be met.

It will take collaboration, planning and determination to make it happen, but it's a worthy vision on which to focus community energy 30 years after the Expo '74 creators set the stage.