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S P O K A N E

Great Gorge Park needed, possible

Our View: Spokane Gorge park could enhance a natural treasure of our region's history.

Ken Sands - For the editorial board

The Spokane River Gorge, stretching from Riverfront Park to Latah Creek, remains largely in a natural state.

The fact that this scenic treasure has been preserved despite a city growing up around it has little to do with visionary land-use planning. The truth is that it's impractical to run bulldozers up and down such steep, rocky slopes.

Nonetheless, a grass-roots organization has been working diligently for the past two years to create a "Great Gorge Park" to honor and protect the area. The Friends of the Falls' conceptual plan for the gorge was unveiled Thursday.

The plan calls for conservation of the landscape, greater public access to the falls, historical and cultural displays and connections to other nearby trails and parks.

It is an ambitious, but necessary, plan. The biggest unresolved question is where to get the money to implement the changes.

Fortunately, the costs of preservation are not great, and there is no known threat to the resource that would require a greater sense of urgency. The city already owns 80 percent of the land in question.

Mike Stone, city parks director, said the city supports the project philosophically if not financially. Official city recognition is crucial when it comes time for Friends of the Falls to apply for grants.

The first step is to hire a consultant to conduct more detailed planning and analysis and to acquire permits. That could cost somewhere between \$50,000 and \$100,000. The money must come from state grants, federal grants, private donations or foundations.

Other community organizations have joined Friends of the Falls to form the Great Gorge Group. Friends of the Centennial Trail and the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture have expressed direct interest in development of

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Culture have expressed direct interest in development of the plan. Companies such as Avista and Metropolitan Mortgage have neighboring properties and are involved, too.

"We've gotten to this point as a grass-roots organization on \$12,000 a year," said Sara Ellerd, a member of Friends of the Falls and the city park board. "Now we've set a goal, and we've just got to do it. I don't think any one of us is willing to admit failure on this. The legacy is worth it."

It helps that the project has gained universal acceptance. "Nobody disagrees on this," said Gavin Cooley, Friends of the Falls board member. "We even had Bryan Flett talking about bringing the salmon back, and the people at Avista were smiling and nodding."

Flett, heritage coordinator of the Spokane Tribe, said the tribe wants to highlight the historical and cultural significance of the gorge.

For thousands of years, Indians gathered along the river banks to fish for salmon. Hydroelectric dams, from Grand Coulee to Avista's, closed off the river to salmon.

"It is our goal one day to get the salmon back to these falls," Flett said. "Some day the dams will reach their `shelf life.' If we don't start laying the groundwork now to bring back the salmon, they won't come back."

That's an ambitious goal. So is the development of a "Great Gorge Park." It takes tremendous vision and leadership for such goals to become reality.

The Friends of the Falls and the Spokane Tribe should be commended for their wisdom and their work. They also could benefit from more community involvement. The next meeting of the Great Gorge Group is scheduled from noon to 1 p.m. on April 16 at the downtown Spokane Public Library.

Ken Sands/For the editorial board

What are your thoughts on *Great Gorge Park needed, possible*

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