

Spokane

## **The latest megawatt price: Falls**

Avista seeks approval to shut off Spokane Falls

[Mike Prager](#) - Staff writer

The waterfall that gives Spokane its identity should be silenced this summer due to drought and a deepening power crisis, park leaders said Thursday.

Avista Utilities wants to shut down the lower Spokane Falls and divert the water to a power plant beneath the Monroe Street Bridge.

The additional energy, although relatively small, would help alleviate a power shortage being worsened by one of the lowest snowpacks on record.

The Spokane Park Board Thursday unanimously endorsed the emergency request from Avista. One board member abstained.

The utility said it plans to meet with other agencies and area Indian tribes to discuss the proposal.

Several park board members characterized the shutdown as reasonable given the seriousness of the drought and regional energy crisis.

"This seems to me to be kind of a silent disaster," Park Board President Steve McNutt said. "In my mind, we have to be good citizens."

In a normal summer, the utility allows a small stream of water to spill over the lower falls from 10 a.m. to just after sundown to preserve the aesthetics of the city's central landmark.

So even when the falls roared in past summers, most of the river's water was tumbling into an underground turbine by way of a low-profile coffer dam atop the falls.

The summertime spill of 200 cubic feet per second was initially required in 1974 under terms of the federal license for the Monroe plant.

The license allows Avista to shut down the falls after dark through the early morning in the summer.

By keeping the falls dry throughout the day, Avista would generate one additional megawatt of power, or enough for about 650 homes.

This summer, that extra megawatt would reduce costly power purchases on the open market, which are expected to be needed to meet customer demand. The extra megawatt also will reduce potential rate increases in the future, utility officials said.

"Yes, it's only one megawatt, but it's still substantial," said Steve Silkworth, manager of the hydropower licensing department at Avista.

Silkworth, who also is a member of the park board, acted as the utility's spokesman during

Thursday's meeting. He did not vote on the issue.

He said Avista would reimburse the park department for any lost revenue on the park gondola ride over the falls. The reimbursement would be based on reduced ridership from previous years and could amount to several thousand dollars or more.

Silkworth explained that Avista will meet with a range of organizations, government agencies and Indian tribes to get their input on the proposal.

The additional power generated at the Monroe Street plant would remain in Spokane, he said.

Avista came up with the idea after the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission asked the utility to look for ways to generate more power during the West Coast's current energy shortage.

Avista is asking FERC to amend its license for the Monroe Street Generating Station to halt its waterfall spills from late June through November this year only.

Park Board members said the value of the falls should not be ignored, and they want the public to have a say, too.

"I just want to make sure we are doing what the people we represent want us to do," park board member Frank Knott said.

Carol Barber, also on the park board, said, "We regret most of all there's a drought that has put us in this position."

Park board member Bonnie Zahara, who abstained from voting, said she is concerned about diminishing the falls as a natural asset.

Utility officials said the request should be viewed in the context of crisis.

"We find ourselves in grave circumstances where we have to look at these options," said Catherine Parochetti, spokeswoman for Avista. "We are responding to a request from FERC. We were asked to be creative."

Avista is also undertaking an aggressive conservation program, part of which includes potential paybacks to customers who cut energy use, Parochetti said.

This year's snowpack is the smallest since 1977, and the flow of the Columbia River at The Dalles Dam is expected to be 54 percent of what it would be in a normal year.

River managers plan to maximize power generation. As a result, spills to help juvenile salmon migrate out to sea are being virtually eliminated.

Gary Stockinger, Avista's hydrologist, said heavy rains and warm weather at the end of April raised flows on the Spokane and Clark Fork rivers enough to fill lakes and reservoirs on both rivers.

The Spokane River peaked on May 2 at 16,800 cubic feet per second, and has since dropped to 8,000 cfs. Its normal peak flow in the spring is 26,000 cfs.

A lot of the spring runoff on those two rivers is getting dumped over spillways because Avista's hydro plants are designed to handle moderate volumes over longer periods of the year.

The Monroe plant has a capacity of 2,900 cfs with a peak output of 15 megawatts.

Stockinger said the Spokane River should be flowing about 2,000 cfs by July 1, so there will be room in the turbine for the smaller volume of water off the falls.

The lowest typical summer flow is about 1,100 cfs.

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