



CLOSING IN ON OPEN SPACES

BY GLENN OAKLEY

After a decade of economic stagnation, Boise is booming. But the elation over a growing city is giving way to apprehension as street signs replace trees along the Boise River, the foothills are carved into endless terraces of view lots and survey stakes appear on favorite nature trails.

During the next 20 years Ada County's population is projected to increase from its current 211,000 people to 290,000-320,000, according to studies by the Ada Planning Association and Idaho Power Co., respectively.

Can Boise add 80,000-110,000 people without losing its wild and natural places, its trout-filled river, backdoor nature trails, wide open spaces and urban wildlife?

Most observers agree that growth in Boise is inevitable, but that the direction and intensity of that growth can be controlled *if* planned for sufficiently, *if* Boiseans are willing to pay more to sustain their quality of life, and *if* that action comes now.

Over and again, the Boise River and Greenbelt are cited as examples of what the city can do to simultaneously protect its natural environment and enhance economic growth. In the 1960s the Boise River was a cesspool, with five meat-packing plants dumping offal into the river, says retired wildlife biologist Hugh Harper. He recalls that while conducting a study of the river, "We were wading through pools of fat globules up to our knees. Sometimes the river ran red with blood."

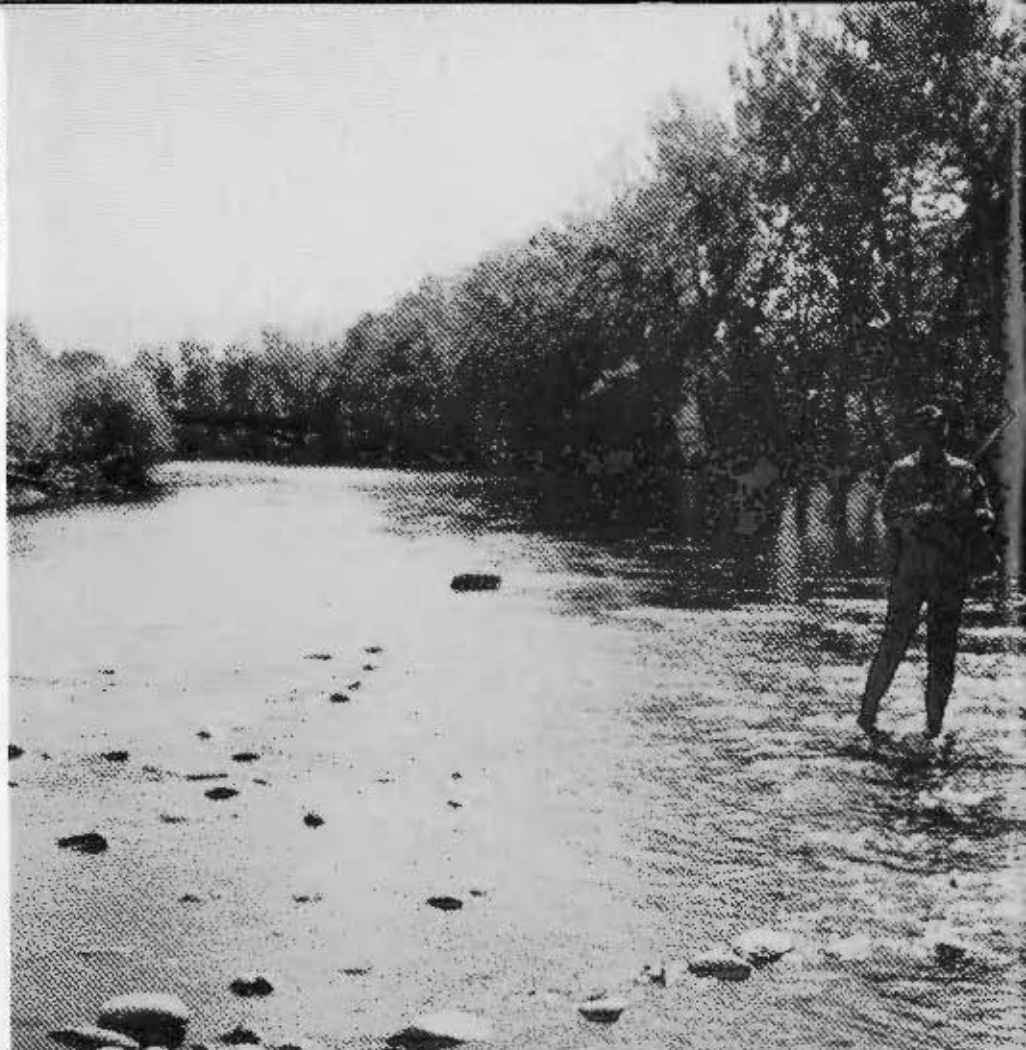
Today, after two and a half decades of often contentious battling over the Boise River Plan, mandatory 200-foot building setbacks and city acquisition of greenbelt pathways, the Boise River is universally regarded as the city's finest gem. City Council president Mike Wetherell says, "The



With view lots selling for as much as \$100,000, devel-



opers have been carving the Boise foothills into a series of terraces, leading to protests from downslope residents.



The Boise River, once a cesspool literally reeking of blood and guts, has become the city's pride and joy through environmental planning, regulations and acquisition of land. Now, some citizens are saying the same foresight and planning can be applied to the Boise foothills, creating greenways stretching from the river to the ridgetops.

The Boise River, a popular trout fishery, is testament to the city's ability to control development

Greenbelt did not just appear. There was a tremendous dispute over whether the city should acquire the property. It's still a constant battle to protect the setbacks."

Yet the ability to fish for native trout in the middle of the city and watch geese, eagles and herons fly overhead is no small part of what attracts people and businesses to Boise.

"I'm just convinced that if you build quality of life you never have to worry about economic growth," says Gary Lyman, director of Boise State's Boise Future Foundation.

Gary Richardson, a public information officer for the Public Utilities Commission and longtime environmental activist, says, "What we've learned about the river, that same kind of enlightenment is occurring in other places." Richardson envisions a series of "greenways" running from the river to the ridgetops via the gulches that cut through the foothills, "where you can walk, ride a bike, ride a horse."

The gulches and ridges of the foothills, however, happen to be the areas under some of the heaviest development pressure in Boise. Hulls Gulch and Castle Rock, place names turned battlegrounds over development vs. preservation, exemplify the key issues. Both areas are privately owned par-

cels of land long used by the public for recreation and access. And both areas are valuable as homesites to their owners.

The residents of adjacent neighborhoods object to the housing developments on a variety of grounds, ranging from loss of wetlands and public access, to increased traffic. The Castle Rock development also was opposed by the Shoshone-Bannock tribe which claims the site is a sacred burial ground.

While the Boise City Council denied developers certain portions of their development plans, Wetherell notes, "Legally, there is no way that this city council or any other that takes its oath of office seriously can deny a private property owner reasonable use of his property."

Richardson concurs with Wetherell in the Castle Rock case. "That piece of property was annexed and zoned years ago," he says. "But when it comes to further growth in new areas [not yet zoned residential] the city government can tell developers under what conditions they do get the rezoning," including provisions for public access and open space common areas. "We've got the opportunity now in each of the foothills gulches and some ridges to preserve those as open spaces and public places." The Boise Foothills Committee, comprising citizen groups,



and protect environmental quality.

developers, professional planners and city and county officials, is considering such options.

Richardson says, "I know there's a lot of nervousness among developers that this is some kind of commie plot to take their land. But everybody wins if this is done right. Developers will increase the value of their development."

Fred Kopke, whose Orida Investment Corp. is working on the Hulls Gulch development, agrees that, "Everybody can gain with cooperative negotiations." He says he generally supports a greenways concept, with the understanding that, "In most cases you're dealing with private property." However, Kopke, one of the developers on the Boise Foothills Committee, says the existing foothills ordinance has worked well. "On a technical side I think the foothills have been pretty well protected," he says.

"Economic growth is what triggers these problems," he continues. "We're responding to the market." But Kopke believes foothills development will be more limited than many fear. The cost of construction increases the higher one goes in the foothills, he notes. "There are only so many buyers for \$100,000 lots. I think the market will be self limiting."

(Continued on page 25)

THE FUTURE IS YOURS TO SEE

If you had your choice, what would Ada County be like in the year 2010?

Would you slow the pace of growth by placing tighter regulations in areas like the foothills? Would you increase taxes so people could have more services? Or would you prefer life in Ada County just the way it is today?

Those are just a few of the scenarios that faced Ada County residents who participated in the latest survey sponsored by the BSU-based Boise Future Foundation.

The survey, which had 451 respondents, was designed to determine what type of "preferred future" residents want by the year 2010, says Gary Lyman, director of the Boise Future Foundation and author of the survey.

"We got to 1990 from 1970 by magic. There was no guidance, no planned purpose. Now we have opportunities and responsibilities to focus on what people desire," he says.

Questions focused on seven quality-of-life issues—land development, air quality, roads and bridges, population growth, taxes and services, community safety, education and culture.

The results, says Lyman, point to a populace that is willing to pay for additional services if positive results are shown.

"People are not totally dissatisfied with the status quo, but they do want to see adjustments. There's always been a fairly large percentage who would pay more, but government must do a better job of showing the effects of that," Lyman comments.

The survey also reveals a citizenry that is concerned about the impact growth is having on the county.

Thirty-four percent of the respondents, for example, favored a future in which government regulations prohibit development along the Boise River and on the foothills. Another 50 percent favored regulations that limit development in those areas, while only 16 percent favored moderate regulation.

There was strong agreement that Boise's air quality should not deteriorate any further, even if it meant a strictly enforced ban on wood burning during inversions. Forty-five percent said air quality should stay about the same as it is

now and another 44 percent favored improvement.

The survey also indicated that two-thirds of the respondents favored population growth that is close to the national average, which means Ada County would have 253,000 residents in 20 years.

That represents a slowdown from the current growth pace, which is well above the national average. Seventeen percent favored more growth, while 14 percent wanted no growth.

A majority (57 percent) said they favored increased taxes in return for better public services and education. Thirty-six percent said taxes should stay at their current levels, and services should remain the same.

A recent study indicated that per-pupil expenditures in the Boise schools lags 25 percent behind similar cities in the West. Fifty-six percent of survey respondents said they favored increasing expenditures to reach the average of those cities, and another 33 percent favored per-pupil expenditures above the average.

Other results of the survey indicated that:

- Respondents favored taking some action to improve the county's road and bridge system. Forty-four percent said funding for roads and bridges should be generated every year, using impact fees on development and local option taxes on sales and gasoline.

- Eighty-seven percent supported increased expenditures for programs aimed at the prevention of crime, while 10 percent favored a community that relied more on police services.

- Sixty-one percent said cultural services should be expanded to meet demand.

The survey will be a source of information to Boise Visions, a city-sponsored program that involves hundreds of citizens examining Boise's present and future.

"Eventually the committees will have to make policy recommendations that match what people prefer, tempered by some reality. This survey will provide some guidelines on those preferences," says Lyman.

"This is the beginning of a 'collective direction' that will get us where we want to be in 20 years," Lyman says. □

URBAN EAGLES

BY GLENN OAKLEY

At dawn, when the sun is just cresting the basalt cliffs above the Boise River, the eagles leave their roosts. A sudden flap of 6-foot wings in the brittle-cold morning air, and they are off.

The eagles come winging in alone or in pairs as they follow the river over concrete bridges, past the expensive new homes that have sprouted along the riverbanks, between the blockish buildings of glass and concrete that are the corporate headquarters for Morrison Knudsen, Albertson's and Ore-Ida, past Boise State University, through the heart of Idaho's capital city.

Each winter they come. In 1988-89, a particularly cold winter, there were at least 25 eagles at one time living on the edge of Boise, and as many as 50 came and went throughout the season.

That bald eagles would winter near a city of some 120,000 people can be attributed to the valley's relatively mild winters; the Boise River, which rarely freezes over and is stocked with trout; and the stretches of undeveloped and relatively wild river bottom land which remain.

But can a growing city sustain eagles in its midst?

Robin Spahr, who spent two winters following the eagles of Boise for her Boise State master's degree project in raptor biology, says the answer depends on how development along the river corridor is managed. And that, she says, "remains to be seen."

In her master's thesis she writes, "Based on my findings, development of remaining land along river corridors should be limited or at least regulated to limit impacts on eagle habitat."

Now working on threatened and endangered species projects for the U.S. Forest Service in Ogden, Utah, Spahr monitored the eagles from Lucky Peak Dam, 10 miles east of the city limits,

through town to its western edge during the winters of 1987-89.

The eagles roost overnight in an expanse of cottonwoods along the river just a few miles from the eastern edge of the city. This chunk of wildness, which will remain essentially undeveloped, is owned by the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands.

But more developments along the river corridor are planned. Construction of a new bridge near Warm Springs Avenue is planned to connect ParkCenter Boulevard with Warm Springs Avenue. And not far from Barber Pool, where the eagles roost and seek sanctuary, another bridge has been contemplated in order to connect Interstate 84 with Highway 21.

Housing developments are also of concern. The Boise River corridor is perhaps *the* most valuable development property in the city, with the promise of bald eagles flying past one's doorstep a significant selling point.

The city of Boise has adopted the Boise River Plan, which in places prohibits construction or development within 200 feet of the river. The setback should protect most of the perching trees necessary for the eagles and helps ensure the integrity of the river itself.

But any development along the river is a compromise. The question is how much the impact of development can be mitigated.

Eagles tend to avoid developed areas, Spahr determined. And people walking along the river were, she wrote, "the most disturbing to eagles in terms of flushing frequencies."

The flushing of eagles in the winter is particularly troublesome because the birds are forced to expend energy flying during a time when they are trying to conserve energy in order to survive. Spahr recommends buffer zones of thick understory



vegetation separating perching trees and pathways.

"A buffer zone of 200 meters would protect 96 percent of the eagles along the Boise River," she concluded. "Planners should decide what proportion of a population of eagles they are willing to disturb and plan buffers accordingly."

Learning to accommodate eagles near population centers may become increasingly important, Spahr notes. "As development of bald eagle wintering habitat increases, bald eagles may be forced to winter in close contact with people."



CLOSING OPEN SPACES . . .

(Continued from page 23)

Nevertheless, others believe acquisition of land—through easements or purchase—may be necessary to ensure public access to much of the foothills. Wetherell says land acquisition is, "One of the most important and also most difficult" functions of city government. "People don't want to spend money for something that won't be important for another 10 or 20 years," he says. But Wetherell says he has been pushing for a bond issue which would fund development of existing parks as well as purchase public lands for the city. He says the bond issue may go before the voters this spring.

Development in Boise and Ada County is currently governed by a tangle of special area plans, the Boise Metropolitan Plan, and planning and zoning ordinances, all of which in turn are administered by a variety of governmental bodies.

In addition, there are perhaps equally as many citizen groups, neighborhood organizations and special committees formed to fight, monitor or manage development of Boise's natural areas.

Susan Stacy, a Boise city planner from 1979-1986 who is completing a master's in history from BSU, calls the metropolitan plan, "very obsolete right now. It was built around a commercial center in the downtown center. We need a new way of looking at the city."

The Boise Future Foundation's Lyman concurs. "We don't have a comprehensive plan," he says. "We have a bunch of zoning regulations." Richardson, "There is no real plan for the foothills. There's an ordinance. It creates some rules and conditions, but there's no overview that looks to what kind of development we want there."

Mayor Dirk Kempthorne's Boise Visions project, which involves some 450 citizens divided into committees, is seen by some as a means to develop a new comprehensive plan for the city.

An 11-person planning team, including Lyman, and a 26-person steering committee, including BSU President John Keiser, oversees 20 working committees that are examining such aspects of the city as land use and cultural amenities.

The committees are charged with assessing the current status of open space or museums, for example, and then suggesting what the situation might look like in 20 years under various scenarios.

Sheri Freemuth, an Ada County planner teaching a course this semester at BSU, says this sort of process, while lengthy and labo-

rious, is powerful because regulations resulting from intensive citizen participation are "armed with public consensus."

But while the talks and studies progress, so too does development. Last summer alone, foothills housing development destroyed four populations of one of the rarest plants in Idaho, Mulford's milkvetch.

Bob Moseley, a plant ecologist who oversees the plant portion of the Idaho Natural Heritage Program, says, "Very few people understand what's at stake—that these are federal candidates for listing [under the Endangered Species Act]. They are part of the natural heritage of the state. This is part of global diversity. Actions right here in Boise affect global diversity."

While protecting the environment is often viewed as a one-sided affair—people doing nature a big favor by not destroying it—there is a reciprocal aspect which might well be considered.

Harper remembers the Boise floods of 1959 when 5 inches of rain fell in a few hours. The wetlands in places like Hulls Gulch, he notes, act as sponges to absorb such cloudbursts. "If we get a storm of the same magnitude of August of '59, we'll have a flow of 2,400 cubic feet per second down Hulls Gulch, and about 50 percent of that would be sand and silt," he says.

Despite improvements in the Boise River, Harper believes Boiseans may be too complacent about the well-being of the waterway. The 200-foot building setback [for land upstream of Municipal Park] is "a bare minimum, really," he says. Harper consulted with the developers of the Spring Meadow housing project, the first managed under the Boise River Plan. But even there he notes that residents are mowing their lawns to the edge of Loggers Creek, in violation of the plan. And, noting that levies were built between the river and Spring Meadow, Harper says, "We've denied the river the use of all its flood plain. That's like putting the water in a hose through a nozzle." Harper notes that Idaho has been in a dry weather cycle for the last several years, but when wetter seasons return, higher runoff in the river and gulches may test the man-made modifications.

Boise can avoid the shoddy and unplanned development nightmares of places like Denver and Los Angeles, says Harper.

"Boise still has the opportunity to do it, but the opportunities are closing rapidly," he comments. "What we get saved in the next 10 years is what we'll have to live with. After that, anything more will come very, very dearly." □

While Boiseans can pride themselves on having a city which hosts a sizeable eagle population, the fact is the eagles are here because the majority of their wintering habitat has been overrun by people and they have few options left.

Spahr found that, compared with studies of other eagle populations, "it appears that the Boise eagle population is more tolerant of human activity. While this is an indication that bald eagles may be able to adapt, to a certain degree to humans, protection for this population is still necessary."

As pressure increases for river corridor development, Boiseans will discover how adaptable they are to the needs of urban eagles. □