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The Waterfront District

Garden City bridges the river via parks and urban renewal.

by Sheila Spangler

In Garden City, near East 36th and North Adams Streets, the bright future of a new kind of urban living emerges from a blighted meatpacking site. Developers call it the Waterfront District. Its riverside townhouses face a public beach and the new whitewater park. A footbridge crosses to Esther Simplot Park and Boise's newest urban renewal district, with plans for bike paths, streetcars, and mixed-used shopping nodes.

Conceived in 2007, the waterfront bridged many constituencies. Kayakers wanted boulders in the river to create an urban whitewater experience. Boise City Council wanted high-density infill. The Ada County Highway District wanted a 30th Street traffic connection from State Street to the I-184 Connector. A real estate developer dreamed of a riverfront subdivision. In 2015, as public funding joins private investment, people who treasure the river are reclaiming an industrial stretch of the Boise floodplain and charting a more profitable path.

The River and Its Players

The story begins with a group of kayakers—Jo Cassin, Stan Kolby, and Paul Collins—who managed to convince a city government to build a whitewater park in the urban Boise River. According to Cassin, co-owner of Idaho River Sports, beginning in the late 1980s several individuals with varying interests about water usage in the Boise River got together. “This was just a group of Boise River users with different backgrounds and different ideas and plans who came together to make it work for everyone.” This group was formed at the prompting of Pete Zimowsky, long-time outdoors reporter for the *Idaho Statesman*, and Paul Collins, a local physician and whitewater enthusiast. The Boise River 2000 Group consisted of recreationists, environmentalists, irrigators, state agencies, state representatives, and those involved in noxious weed eradication and flood control. “Basically, we would float certain sections of the Boise River in canoes or rafts. Each group would talk about what their needs were,” said Cassin. She learned about different issues affecting the various users.



IDAHO AIRSHIPS, INC.

People concerned about flood control wanted to maintain as little water as possible in Lucky Peak Reservoir in case of a quick snowmelt or heavy rain. Irrigators wanted to maintain as much water as possible for agricultural production. Environmentalists and Idaho Fish and Game officials worried about the volume and speed of the river flow and how it negatively impacted the vegetation and fish.

After several seasons of performing this adjunct unofficial impact study, Collins, Cassin, and Kolby approached the City of Boise requesting that some boulders be placed in the river to create a whitewater experience. This request launched the intent to build a river park. “Never underestimate the power of a few,” Tom Governale, Boise’s superintendent of parks said.

IDAHO HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Industries, such as lumberyards, dumped their waste into the Boise River.

The Barber Lumber company was located in South Boise near the present-day Marianne Williams Park.

Until the 1960s, the few who valued the section of the river west of downtown Boise were the owners of industrial processing plants. Most used it as junkyard and sewer for waste from slaughterhouses or to obtain water for concrete plants. In part due to former Boise City Council member Bill Onweiler’s promotion of the idea for a greenbelt, City of Boise officials gained a new perspective about how the river figured prominently in the city’s future. In *When the River Rises: Flood Control on the Boise River 1943-1985*, Susan M. Stacy wrote, “In the early 1960s Boise officials determined it was time ... to do some general comprehensive land use planning.” The city hired Harold E. Atkinson, a planning consultant from California. In

his report, he suggested that the city “acquire land along the Boise River so as to create a continuous greenbelt of public lands stretching along the river throughout the entire length of the community.” Atkinson’s report emphasized that with Boise as the state capital, “it has more than the usual need and opportunity for parks and green areas” and that “physical enhancement is a particularly worthwhile community goal.” Atkinson’s report catalyzed the city’s acquisition of the land along the river through purchases and easements to create the Boise River Greenbelt.

Atkinson’s recommendation and Onweiler’s promotion of a river greenbelt owe their genesis to the construction of Lucky Peak Dam in 1955. The main concerns for the residents of the Treasure Valley in the 1950s regarding the Boise River centered on the timing and volume of water release from the dam to maintain sufficient resources for irrigators and to reduce the threat of flooding. Awareness of the river and its potential additional urban amenities changed in the 1960s as a result of Atkinson’s report, but little happened during the next 25 years. Gravel pit operators continued mining from riverside quarries, farmers pastured their livestock along the river banks, and lumberyards and food processors dumped their effluent into the passing stream. In fact, parents warned their children to stay out of the river because it was so polluted. Although the City of Boise stopped pouring its raw sewage into the river in 1950, the treatment plants dumped more and more detergent into the water, and, according to Stacy’s research, the food processors continued to deposit “grease, potato peelings, beet pulp, blood and manure” into the river. Despite the industrial sludge, kids floated the river on inner tubes during the sweltering southern Idaho summers, but they stayed far upstream from the “slime beds” west of downtown.

Efforts to clean up the river became critically important after the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972. This act provided the means for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to “provide technical assistance to local communities as they planned alternatives to dumping untreated wastes in rivers.” Federal and local agencies worked together to clean up the



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

A pollution warning is posted on the Boise River.

river. These joint efforts led to the construction of a wastewater treatment plant in Boise and other measures to reduce pollution caused by industrial users. In addition, the general public became enthusiastic supporters of creating a greenbelt designed for those who wanted to walk, bike, fish, tube, or raft the Boise River. Thus began the transformation of the Boise River from industrial tool to economic and recreational amenity.



BOB YOUNG

Kayakers wait for their turn to ride the wave.

Whitewater Bonanza

Launched in 2012, the Boise River Park serves as an economic development tool in the Treasure Valley. Although no formal report has been made on the potential economic impact of the Boise River Park, other similar projects in western U.S. communities forecast a positive economic outcome. Steamboat Springs Whitewater Park in Colorado estimated its total potential economic benefit at \$7.2 million per year. (According to the 2010 census report, the population of Steamboat Springs was 12,088 people. In comparison, Boise was home to 210,000 residents in 2010.) The Truckee River Recreation Plan, a whitewater park in Reno-Sparks, Nevada, was estimated to bring in \$1.9 million in its first year. Similarly, the Clear Creek Whitewater Park in Golden, Colorado, projected the recreational and beneficial use values between \$1.36 million and \$2.03 million annually.

Local Boise businessman Clay Carley champions waterfront development. Carley, son of the founder of Old Boise historical district and owner of the Owyhee Plaza, sees river recreation as a way for a city in isolation to market its amenities. “We are isolated, yet we want to grow up,” Carley said from his office on Main Street. Carley explained that it is difficult to translate quality-of-life features into financial reasons for companies to relocate their workforces here. “We were once in the top 10 budding high-tech communities—when Micron and HP [Hewlett-Packard] were moving ahead. We didn’t recognize the power of that and take advantage of it.” He believes that the community missed an early opportunity to encourage and promote computer science degrees and to get funding to bring in more high-tech businesses to create what he called a “critical mass.”

Yet Carley saw the recently constructed river park as a way to attract and retain new businesses. “It is a unique amenity that sets us apart. ... We have to build attraction on lifestyle. It’s slow and painful, but it does work.” Carley spoke from experience as one of several fundraisers for Friends of the Parks, a group of volunteers formed primarily to raise money to construct the Boise River Park. Carley had raised funds for other causes, but this one was the most challenging because of its single-purpose use and small niche. Among the many causes competing for donation dollars, “boating is a weird thing to raise money for,” Carley admitted. “Most people that are passionate about it have no money.” His team’s fundraising efforts garnered close to \$1 million for phase I of the Boise River Park.

In addition to the money raised by Carley and Friends of the Parks, three local foundations contributed significant amounts to the renewal of the west end of Boise and to the creation of two of Boise’s newest parks, the Boise River Park and Esther Simplot Park. J.R. Simplot, Joe Albertson, and Harry Morrison created what became multimillion-dollar companies in Boise at roughly the same time; these companies are Simplot Company, a producer of agriculture-related products; Albertsons, a national grocery store chain;

and Morrison-Knudsen, an international engineering and construction contractor (purchased by Washington Group International in 1996 and merged into URS Corporation in 2007). All three businessmen formed nonprofit foundations to funnel a good portion of their wealth into local causes. (Years later, J.R. Simplot's grandson, J.D. Simplot, would play a role in waterfront renewal by arranging the financing for the construction of the Waterfront subdivision in Garden City.)

Besides the philanthropy of wealthy individuals, the willing participation of city government also played a large role in the redevelopment of the Waterfront District. According to Elaine Clegg, a Boise City Council member, the city invested approximately \$2 million in a hydrology study and floodway structure that made Esther Simplot Park possible. This study also provided the information necessary to protect Garden City in the event of a flood. Garden City changed its comprehensive plan, altered its zoning ordinance, and made some needed infrastructure changes. "These kinds of efforts rarely happen because one player says 'I am going to do it,'" Clegg asserted. "They happen because multiple players, even some with competing visions, figure out a way to work together so everyone's vision can work."

Clegg emphasized that the City of Boise, specifically the Public Works and Parks Department and Planning and Development services, helped craft a vision for the entire area surrounding the Esther Simplot Park. This area was recorded as the West End plat in 1903. By 1906, a lumber mill was constructed on the east side of the river occupying the same geographic area as the new Esther Simplot Park, scheduled to open in spring 2016. Slaughterhouses, petroleum tank farms, gravel pits, and car lots made up some of the commercial business activity in this area during the 1920s. In 1992, the Interstate 184 Connector provided a bypass for automobile traffic, and the area experienced an economic decline. The construction of Whitewater Boulevard by the Ada County Highway District in 2012 provided a thoroughfare from State Street to Fairview Avenue to the I-184 Connector. According to Clegg, getting a new arterial corridor in a mature

neighborhood is “pretty unusual.” In 2013, the neighborhood was rechristened with its original name, the West End.

Clegg visualized the revitalization of the West End neighborhood long before she joined the Boise City Council. “We had all this land so near downtown being ignored and underutilized and yet it had all these assets—the river, the greenbelt, proximity to downtown, and a historic neighborhood,” Clegg recalled. She made it clear that without the support of fellow City Council members, the Boise Parks and Recreation Department, Ada County Highway District, and the West End Neighborhood Association, the changes would not have occurred.

A New Vision for Garden City

While the City of Boise planned the Boise River Park, the Esther Simplot Park, and the West End neighborhood, the unkempt property directly across the river in Garden City sat vacant. Looking through a bramble of blackberry bushes and blocked by a cattle gate, real estate developer Jim Neill noticed the bare 17.5-acre riverfront property at the end of 36th Street in Garden City in 2004. He quickly negotiated with the sellers to acquire the property. His ability to finance the purchase was uncertain, but he had faith it would work out.

Although no one person was responsible for Garden City’s recent transformation, Jim Neill was acknowledged as a catalyst for change by those who worked with him. Neill invested his entire life savings and devoted 10 years of his life to the Waterfront District project on the Boise River in Garden City. Unable to afford to live in the subdivision he created, he lived a couple of blocks away in a place he described as a teardown. Although just a short walk from the new Waterfront District development, it was a far cry from his former residence. “I needed a roof over my head and wanted to finish what I had started,” explained Neill. “It was 80% unemployment among my friends, not 8%.”

In 2004, Neill visited mixed-media artist Surel Mitchell, who lived on the corner of 33rd and Carr Streets in Garden City. Mitchell’s enthusiasm about the area and the changing



ADAM PENVEY

Riverside trailer, Garden City, 2014



ADAM COTTERELL/BOISE STATE RADIO

Dave Green of Garden City lives with his son in a park of mobile homes slated for gentrification.

culture, particularly in the artistic community, intrigued Neill. After Mitchell's death in 2011, Garden City renamed the area encompassing the properties from the Boise River to the Bench and from 37th Street to the Riverside Hotel as the "Surel Mitchell Live, Work, Create District" to honor Mitchell for her instrumental efforts to create a new vision for the area. In 2012, Surel's Place was incorporated as a nonprofit artist-in-residency program using Mitchell's former home as a temporary residence-studio. According to the organization's website, the nonprofit assists struggling artists by providing free rent, utilities, and a modest stipend for a specified period.



IDAHO STATESMAN

Garden City's Waterfront District is a successful urban renewal project begun by developer Jim Neill a decade ago on land that once supported a slaughterhouse.

Near Mitchell's home and originally the site of a meatpacking plant, the property acquired by Neill was the culmination of knowing the right people at the right time and having a unique perspective on the future. The concept for the project began in 2004. According to Neill, "everyone almost had the idea, but no one knew exactly what the end result would look like." Neill credits Sherry McKibben, principal with McKibben and Cooper Architects, with understanding his vision by putting his idea on paper and making sense of it. She encouraged Neill to make the area look and feel safe.

Neill and his four partners—experienced real estate investors and builders, Gene Harding, J.D. Simplot, Peter

Harris, and David Elcox—acquired the property in spring 2005. Harris, an experienced contractor with knowledge of road construction and subdivision utility installation, commenced with the necessary work.

By December 2006, the cost of the project was approaching \$6 million and all funds had been spent. Before sales of subdivision lots could begin, final plat approval was needed. This took a year and a half of public hearings, required approvals, and administrative oversight by various governmental agencies.

Neill served on the steering committee in 2006, when Garden City implemented a comprehensive plan. City code hadn't been updated for almost 20 years. Neill's involvement provided the impetus for change, according to Jenah Thornborrow, economic development officer with Garden City. "Jim definitely had a vision and while there were a number of players involved, he helped push through the comprehensive plan," she said. The property required rezoning. The old code had created a Wild West mentality without much concern for development. As a result, residential property abutted industrial lots. Garden City functioned as the literal dumping ground for businesses that the City of Boise did not want. Thornborrow indicated that changing the city code took a lot of coordination and compromise to make things work.

In yet another feat of collaboration and cooperation, Garden City and Boise constructed a footbridge across the Boise River in 2011. The bridge provided access for foot and bike traffic from 36th Street on the south side of the river in Garden City to Quinn's Pond on Pleasanton Street on the north side of the river in Boise. Garden City mayor John Evans and David Bieter, mayor of Boise, deserve credit for this unprecedented collaboration. This was a significant accomplishment and a historic occasion. As recently as 1977, former Boise mayor Dick Eardley had no kind words for Garden City or its residents. According to J.M. Neil's article, Eardley said, "A significant number of undesirables live in and operate out of Garden City. We do not want that area to expand." By 2011, a new attitude prevailed.



JIM LYONS VIA FOURSQUARE

36th Street pedestrian bridge

Mayors Evans and Bieter and their respective staffs worked together to find a solution to create a new river experience for the community and to benefit both municipalities. The footbridge built across the river linked Boise and Garden City physically and economically. The 12-foot-wide concrete and steel beam footbridge cost \$750,000. Most of the funding (\$550,000) came from an American Recovery Reinvestment Act federal stimulus grant. The City of Boise covered the remaining \$250,000.

The footbridge provided a physical as well as psychological connection between the two cities. Not only did it allow runners, walkers, and bike riders to cross the river, but it provided a safe route for Garden City students to attend Whittier Elementary and Anser Charter schools on the Boise side. This access enhanced the feeling of community and added to the area's livability. The bridge played a critical role in the urban renewal efforts on both sides of the river—connecting Boise's West End and Garden City's Live, Work, Create neighborhoods. The bridge was a metaphor for the future of economic development—connect, collaborate, and create. Both mayors touted the 36th Street footbridge as a “great example of neighboring cities working together to leverage resources to the benefit of the entire community.”

More bridge-building occurred when Mayors Evans and Bieter negotiated to adjust the boundary lines for property on both sides of the river. Originally, Garden City's annexation encompassed the Thurman Mill diversion dam at the site of the new hydraulic whitewater wave shaper. The two city governments agreed to swap jurisdiction for the water park to the City of Boise while Garden City obtained tax revenue from Joe's Crab Shack, a Boise restaurant located upstream on the river. This made sense because the City of Boise possessed the infrastructure to manage parks and provide emergency medical, police, and fire protection. Mayor Evans believed both municipalities benefited economically because of the switch. “We all like to eat the golden egg,” he said. “So we need to take care of the goose that lays it.”

Farmers and the Simplot Foundation

The J.R. Simplot Foundation made it possible for City of Boise to acquire the abandoned 55 acres of land along the Boise River where the former Consolidated Concrete plant stood. This property, now the site of Esther Simplot Park, is located directly across the river from Garden City's Waterfront District housing development. The circumstances that led to the J.R. Simplot Foundation's donation took a meandering path much like the Boise River before it was channelized more than 40 years ago.

In the mid-1990s, the J.R. Simplot Foundation sold Idaho Ice World, a local ice skating rink, to the City of Boise for \$1 million. At the time, the property had a value of approximately \$12 million. At roughly the same time, the City of Boise negotiated a \$3 million offer to acquire the 55-acre Consolidated Concrete plant property. With approximately \$2 million available in its coffers, the city needed funds to complete the purchase. The J.R. Simplot Foundation returned the \$1 million it had received from the City of Boise for the purchase of the Idaho Ice World property with one caveat: the 55 acres must be turned into a park named after J.R. Simplot's wife, Esther. Thus, the new park added another gem to Boise's Ribbon of Jewels, the convocation of riverside parks named after Boise patrons and wives of successful local businessmen. In addition, the J.R. Simplot Foundation committed up to \$10 million for development of the Esther Simplot Park.

According to Amy Stahl, community relations manager for the Boise Parks and Recreation Department, "One of the special things about Boise is that donors have a voice in the future development and improvements that occur in the park." Scott Simplot, son of deceased industrial magnate J.R. Simplot, as vice president and director of the J.R. Simplot Foundation was instrumental in developing the park layout. Other board members include J.R. Simplot's daughter Gay Simplot, former wife of three-time Idaho governor Butch Otter; son Don Simplot; and grandchildren Debbie McDonald and Ted Simplot. The foundation board made the decision to donate



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J.R. Simplot, 1909-2008

funds for the park and hired a world-class design firm to create the concept. “I can’t help but use superlatives,” Stahl gushed, “because it will be an extraordinary conversion of an industrial property into this recreational wonderland with swimming, boating, family space, picnicking areas—all providing this interface with water.” The park is scheduled to open in spring 2016.



CITY OF BOISE

Concurrently, the City of Boise constructed a new \$1 million diversion dam with wave shapers on the river. Although the actual dam cost \$1 million, superintendent of parks Governale said, other parts of the project required to support the dam pushed the price tag higher. The newly rebuilt Thurman Mill diversion dam, officially named the Harry Morrison Dam, commemorates the founder of one of the world’s most successful dam-building companies, Morrison-Knudsen. According to Governale, a group of Morrison-Knudsen retirees raised \$50,000 to name the dam in honor of Morrison. For the overall construction of the Boise River Park, the Harry W. Morrison Foundation contributed \$200,000 in matching grants over 3 years, and the Joe and Kathryn Albertson Foundation donated \$1.4 million. The overall total

cost of phase I of the Boise River Park was approximately \$3.6 million.

After the rebuilding of Thurman Mill diversion dam, Farmers Union inked an agreement to work with the City of Boise on the development of phase II of the Boise River Park. According to the Friends of the Park Boise River Park website, the City of Boise will spend \$830,000 to replace a culvert and headgate and cover the ditch in preparation for the construction of Esther Simplot Park. The J.R. Simplot Foundation committed to construct Esther Simplot Park at a cost of approximately \$10 million. Phase II of the river park will require another \$2 to \$3 million in private donations to augment funding from the City of Boise. The city estimated the total budget for the Boise River Park phase II at \$7 million. Work on phase II of the Boise River Park began in early 2015.

The mission of an irrigation district is to protect the water rights of agricultural production users. It was unprecedented for one, let alone two, irrigation districts to willingly work with a governmental entity to allow the use of diversion dams for recreational purposes. This cooperation was essential to making the water park a reality.

Building Community

Because of the economic downturn in 2008, the Waterfront District subdivision project languished until late 2013, when lots began to sell again and building recommenced. In 2015, a mix of single-family homes, townhouses, and live-work spaces in Tuscan, modern, and other, eclectic styles lined new streets with names like Willow Bar Way and Water Pocket Lane, evocative of the newly constructed river park just a stone's throw away. "There's nothing else like it in Idaho," said Jenna King, Waterfront District resident and realtor at Keller Williams Realty Boise. From her third-floor balcony at dusk, she gazed at the lavender foothills and the emerging lights downtown Boise. Below her, neighbors with dogs socialized on a patch of grass near the site of a future clubhouse and pool. "It's 'yappy hour,'" King smiled. It took a while, but "there's a real sense of community here," she said.

That community will soon include more affordable housing. A half-block away, on 36th Street, “36 Oak” is a subdivision containing 24 small lots on which single-family homes will be built. Construction was scheduled to begin in May 2015. According to Joe Swenson, CEO of the nonprofit



Orange lines mark Boise's 30th Street "West End" urban renewal district, now linked to Garden City by footbridge.

Neighborhood Housing Services, this is one of several projects designed to bring affordable housing to the gentrified Live, Work, Create District in Garden City. Doing business as Neighborhood Homes, Neighborhood Housing Services completed and sold five homes in the range of \$140,000 on East Adams Court, and it has plans for two additional pocket neighborhoods with smaller cottages on smaller lots designed to create close-knit communities with cost-efficient homes.

Whereas the neighborhood can be accessed by foot or bike or kayak from the greenbelt, drive-in access to the area is from East 36th Street off of Chinden Blvd. In 2014, Ada County Highway District added street lighting, expanded parking, installed decorative pavement, built berms, planted trees, and put in sidewalks along 36th Street. The project cost approximately \$550,000.

Years from now when the Waterfront District becomes seasoned with use, remember Sarel Mitchell's inspiration for a live, work, create neighborhood in a shabby area of Garden City along the Boise River. Recognize the contribution and vision of real estate developer Jim Neill to build a Garden City riverfront subdivision on rundown industrial property previously used to slaughter livestock. Celebrate the teamwork of Boise City officials, individual private donors, and three locally grown nonprofit foundations to construct two new river-based parks. Be thankful for the willing participation of two irrigation districts to allow the use of farmers' water to thrill urban whitewater enthusiasts. Be mindful of the cooperation and leadership of two city governments to literally and figuratively build a footbridge from one side of the river to the other. Perhaps in time, these activities will be known as the perfect storm of economic development in the Treasure Valley: everything and everyone came together at exactly the right time.



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