



A River Runs

by Toby Hatley photos by Joseph Canyon

Right through the heart of downtown Spokane runs one of our community's most precious resources, the Spokane River. Used for energy, recreation, dumping and drawing people in, the Spokane is as important a part of our community as the businesses and people who call this place home. Are we treating it as the precious resource that is is, though? Toby Hatley takes a look at the Spokane, the role it plays in our community, and what is being done to keep it a vibrant part of our region.

CHICAGO NATIVE STEVE Salvatori did not see a river the first time he was in Spokane — there are no water views from I-90 says the former Southern California businessman. Salvatori and his wife Sami had spent four years seeking the perfect place to live after their son graduated from high school when a friend who lives here called. “Have you thought about Spokane?” she asked. “It has everything you’re looking for: higher education, good air service, great quality of life, plenty of outdoor recreation - and water.”

“We wanted all of the benefits we could get out of a small sized city,” says Salvatori who had visited Asheville, North Carolina; Vail, Boulder, Portland, Bend and Madison, Wisconsin. “Spokane wasn’t even on our radar.”

A lake was the first water the Salvatoris saw during their initial June 2007 visit. The couple had quickly driven through town on their way to Coeur d’Alene where their realtor suggested they look for a new home. Nothing there appealed so it was back to Spokane. It wasn’t until after the couple had settled into the Oxford Suites near downtown that they noticed a substantial body of water running through town. A Centennial Trail jog along the Spokane River that evening and a gondola ride over the falls the next day got their attention. A tour of a riverfront home under construction west of downtown a few hours later sealed the deal. “I stood in what is now our living room and could see up and down the river and said ‘Steve is home,’” says Salvatori.

The Salvatoris, who created downtown’s Spokane Entrepreneurial Center, are part of a growing group of newcomers, long-time residents, businesses people, environmental activists and governmental agencies eager to improve the Spokane’s health, protect its cultural heritage and ensure that the city’s historic focal point and economic engine continues to thrive.

“The river is the reason our city exists,” says Spokane Mayor Mary Verner. “It’s the heart of our city; the center of recreation, commerce and business, regardless of whether you’re downtown, on the trails or upriver.” She says a healthy river

“The river is definitely the front porch,” says Tom Reese, project manager for Kendall Yards, the 80-acre downtown residential and retail project overlooking the city from the river’s north bank. Reese, a landscape architect by training, says the Spokane brings “a different dynamic” to Kendall Yards and is the centerpiece for the multi-million dollar development that connects the adjacent West Central neighborhood to downtown. He says Kendall Yards owner Marshall Chesrown would not be spending an estimated \$300 million on the project without the river. “That sets it apart from anywhere else in the country,” says Reese. “The river is reemerging as the community asset that it should be.”

“I can go fly fishing out my back door,” says Salvatori, whose new home is just downstream from Kendall Yards and only a few hundred yards from where the conservation group Friends of the Falls is leading the effort to build a white water kayaking park. He constantly tells friends and business associates about Spokane and the advantages of living and working in an area where an incredible amount of energy is spent to ensure that the river continues to be the region’s biggest asset.

“Without this resource Spokane wouldn’t be here,” says Brian Walker, Watershed Program Director for the Lands Council. “You can have a sparkling beautiful city but if you have a toxic waste dump, you reflect on the city.” Walker says the Lands Council, which collaborates with a variety of groups on environmental and health issues, sees a tremendous shift in the region’s attitude toward the Spokane. He says more affluence, a better educated public and pressure from regulators have galvanized people to help the Spokane which in 2004 was listed in the Top 10 of endangered U.S. waterways by the environmental group American Rivers.

So what shape is the Spokane in?

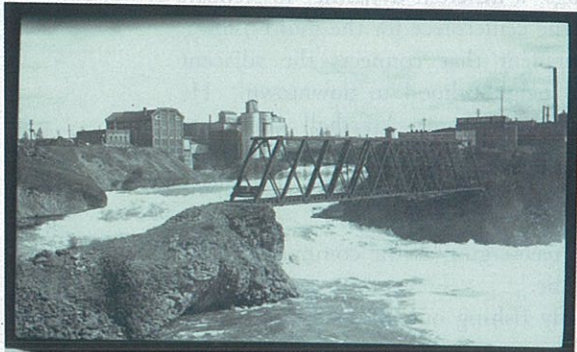
It depends on who you ask, what part of the 111-mile long river you’re talking about or the particular topic. The consensus is that the river is in reasonably good health — you can swim in it and eat the fish with some restrictions. Stricter regula-

Through It

benefits recreationists, tourists seeking a unique outdoor experience in an urban environment and companies trying to recruit top-shelf talent who demand an outstanding quality of life.

tions are forcing the biggest polluters to reduce discharges; contaminated areas are also being cleaned up and restored and traditional opponents are united in their efforts to improve the river.

But they face considerable challenges, including persuading people to embrace water conservation or to pay more to ensure that the region has a safe, sustainable and aesthetically pleasing river which delivers on the slogan "Near Nature, Near Perfect."



"On a scale of one to ten, the Spokane's between a six and eight," says Jani Gilbert, the Washington State Department of Ecology's Spokane based Communication's Manager. Gilbert, who has been dealing with river quality for most of her almost 20 years

with DOE, says the State and other stake holders have made remarkable progress in identifying pollution sources and developing clean up plans.

Gilbert says the focus is on ridding the river of phosphorous, PCBs - polychlorinated biphenyls and Polybrominated diphenyl ethers - PBDEs. Phosphorous, sometimes called phosphate, is a nutrient widely used in lawn and agricultural fertilizers, detergents and in various industrial processes. Phosphorus also occurs naturally in soil as well as human and animal wastes. It causes unwanted algae to grow, which creates problems for lakes and fish.

PCBs were used for high-voltage transformer coolants and pesticides until being banned in the 1970s; they are still found in the Spokane.



sources and eliminate them.

Phosphorous is the main target. Washington made it illegal in 1994 to sell laundry detergents containing more than 0.5 percent phosphorous. Dishwashing soap allows 8.7 percent, but that

changes on July 1, 2008, in Spokane County when the phosphorous content in automatic dishwasher cleaners also drops to 0.5 percent. The stricter phosphate standards take affect statewide in 2010.

A long-term plan to limit phosphorous discharges into the Spokane by four major industrial sources is also being finalized. The State says Kaiser Aluminum, Inland Empire Paper Company, the City of Spokane's sewage treatment plant and the Liberty Lake Sewer and Water District have 10 years to drastically reduce their phosphorus emissions or lose their discharge permits. No one is confident the 2018 deadline will be met.

Lee Mellish, Liberty Lake Sewer and Water District Manager, says the city started a low-phosphorous movement in the 1970s when it became apparent that the upscale community's namesake body of water was in trouble. But 30 years, a recent \$12 million upgrade to the water treatment plant and several phosphorous reducing initiatives won't be enough he says.

The sewer and water district gives away non-phosphorous lawn fertilizers to area residents to cut down on the pollutants entering the storm drains; the district would also like to use reclaimed water to irrigate lawns, golf courses and school yards instead of putting it in the river. But something's missing.

The city continued pumping raw sewage into the river until 1962.

"We're right on the edge of having the technology to meet the requirements," says Mellish. "We consider ourselves on the leading edge of environmental issues. But we still have to consider what is possible and what is affordable." He says that in most cases the technology needed to reach new water quality standards either doesn't exist or is too expensive for the system, which serves just over 2,500 customers.

Spokane County Utilities Director Bruce Rawls says his position is even tougher. Existing facilities have a decade to attain state mandates; Rawls say a new county sewage treatment plant, tentatively scheduled to open in 2012, must meet the limits from the start.

He says the county is currently responsible for putting 28 pounds of phosphorous into the river every day, the new plant will reduce that to 3.3 pounds a day; the new standards call for no more than 1.2 pounds daily. He says the new water treatment facility, estimated to cost between \$115 and \$130 million, "will be the lowest emission plant in the U.S. when it's completed" but will still not comply.

"We sympathize with their viewpoint," says Gilbert. She says the state has "been working in good faith" to help them reach the standards. One idea being floated is to create a system of so-called pollution credits that could be traded on the open market.

Here's how it might work: the state sets a cap on the amount of phosphorus an industry or waste water

treatment plant can dump into the river. Pollution credits would then be distributed to entities that produce phosphorus during normal operations. Companies not using all of their credits can sell them to non-compliant ones. The idea is to limit the total amount of phosphorous being discharged. Efficient companies are rewarded; non-complying ones are, in essence, fined.

The Department of Ecology has also made overtures to the State of Idaho to explore the possibility of creating a regional commission to address water quality concerns on both sides of the border. That includes heavy metals pollution originating in the Silver Valley that has tainted Lake Coeur d'Alene and the Spokane River. Kootenai County's continued growth, which pressures the Rathdrum Prairie aquifer, the sole source of drinking water for almost 500,000 people in both states, would also be on the table.

Idaho Department of Water Resources Regional Manager Bob Haynes loves the idea but says creating an effective agency that can make management decisions acceptable in both states without constant legal battles won't be easy. "How do we do this and still respect the sovereignty of Idaho and Washington?" he asks. "We'll need public input and acceptance to make it work. But it's critical that we get the process started and make meaningful progress."

Some believe the best way to ensure the Spokane's long term health is for all industry and treatment plants to stop using the river altogether. A good idea, but difficult considering the river's history.

Native American tribes used the Spokane as a food source and gathering place long after the first waterwheel driven saw mill was built along the Spokane Falls around 1872. Historic records indicate the city's original municipal water system, which drew from the middle of the river, was approved in 1884.

The Spokane was also a sewer. Voters said yes to a \$1.72 million bond for a waste water treatment plant in 1946, but it didn't open until 1958; the City continued pumping raw sewage into the river until 1962.

And with continued growth came the need for more electricity. Six dams between Lake Coeur d'Alene and Lake Spokane – more commonly known as Long Lake – were built between 1890 and 1922. The five Avista Utilities owned dams and the City of Spokane's Upriver Dam provide power, recreation and, more recently, controversy.

Two downtown diversion dams direct



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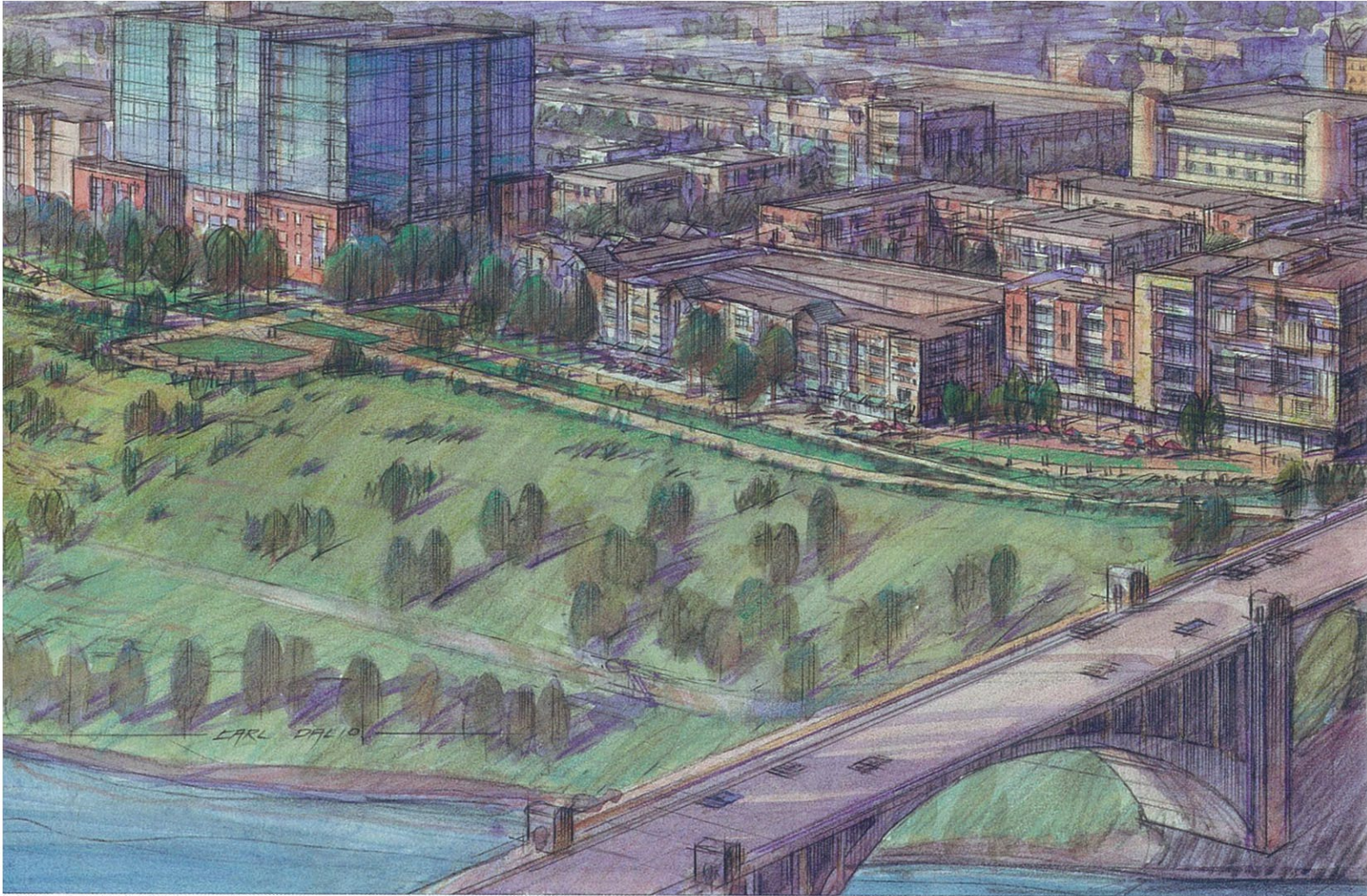
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Courtesy of Black Rock Development

An artist's sketch of Kendall Yards, which will be built alongside the river.

water through a channel on the south side of Riverfront Park to ensure that Avista's Upper Falls power plant near the Lincoln Street Bridge has enough water to spin the turbines, which is not a problem most of the year. But during the dry summer and fall months - the height of the tourist and outdoor recreation seasons - diverting the already low running river results in a trickle over the falls and a dry bed on the Spokane's north bank.

The Sierra Club wants Avista to increase the amount of water it allows through the northern channel; the Spokane based Center for Environment Law and Policy, a statewide water resources watchdog, says Avista should stop diverting water altogether and allow the falls to return to their natural state. The groups say low stream flows adversely affect fish habitat and prevent people from enjoying what could be a free flowing falls. Closing the Upper Falls dam will not financially harm Avista or rate payers, they contend.

"We're not talking about millions," says Rick Eichstaedt of the Center for Justice,

a non-profit legal organization representing the Sierra Club and the CELP. "I'm surprised that's an issue that Avista turned its back to the community on." Eichstaedt says a recent report commissioned by the Sierra Club indicates that it would cost local rate payers 33 cents a year if Avista allowed 500 cubic feet per second of water to flow over the falls.

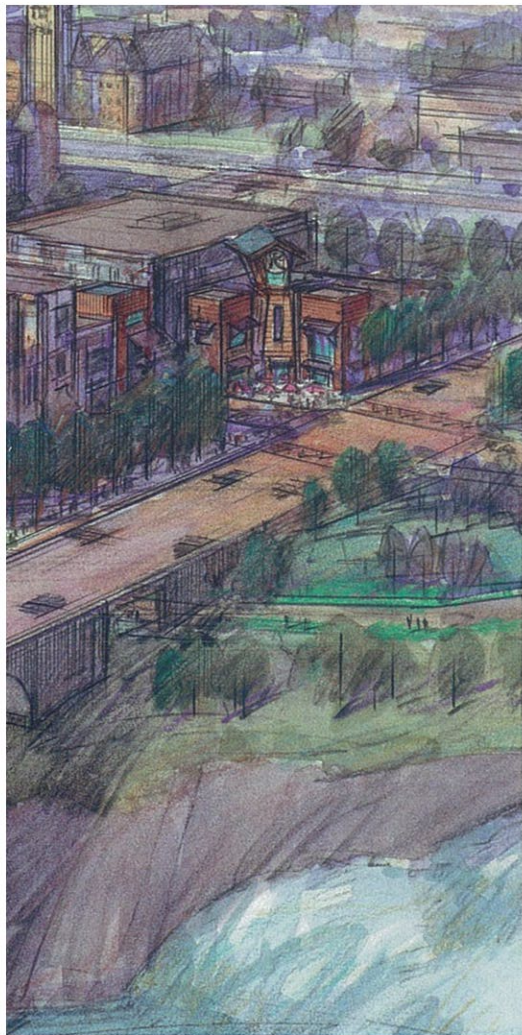
Conservation groups "are over simplifying the issue" says Bruce Howard, Avista's Director of Environmental Affairs. Upper Falls generates enough electricity for 7,500 homes; power that Howard says would have to be purchased elsewhere if the dam closed. Avista says that replacing hydropower with electricity created by burning fossil fuels also means more greenhouse gasses are produced. And ratepayers would bear any additional costs. "We have to look at the big picture," says Howard. "Every time we raise rates we impact people."

The company has agreed as part of its federally mandated re-licensing process

to increase the minimum stream flows through downtown during the summer months to at least 200 cfs, which is enough to fill the river's north channel but only about half of what the Sierra Club wants. Avista says the agreement "resulted from the hard work of many thoughtful and experienced stakeholders." The utility company says its goal "is to create an aesthetic experience that people enjoy while they recreate in or visit Riverfront Park, while maintaining the benefits of power generation."

The power company and environmentalists disagree over stream flows but do see eye to eye on the need to drastically increase water conservation, including mandatory use restrictions.

Latest government figures say Spokane residents use 217 gallons of water a day; the state average is 114 gallons per day. Kootenai County residents consume about 216 gallons a day, which is about on par with rest of Idaho. The smaller cities of Post Falls, Medical Lake and Four Lakes already regulate when




homeowners can water their lawns during the summer months; it may happen in Spokane.

“Different challenges have a common goal,” says Mayor Verner. “The public seems willing to pay more to help the river and the aquifer.” Verner admits that changing our historic love affair with fine green lawns during the hottest months of the year won’t be easy, but she has a plan that she says can produce results:

- More public education about the values and benefits of water conservation.
- Mandatory restrictions to reduce consumption.
- Higher water rates.

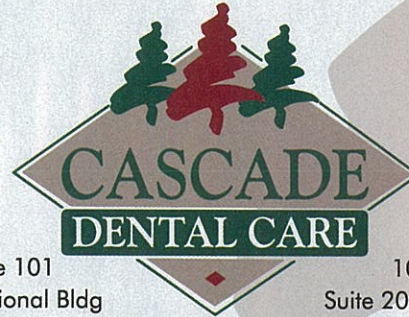
Verner says striking a balance between dipping too far into peoples’ pocketbooks while maintaining the Spokane River’s vigor, aesthetic qualities and economic engine will be challenging. But she and others around the region are more than confident that the current enthusiasm to preserve and improve the river will continue unabated. **S**

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