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WATER LINES: Gore Canyon Whitewater Park first rec project funded by state water board

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WATER LINES

Grand Junction Free Press Weekly Columnist

Grand County took a huge step forward in its quest to build the proposed Gore Canyon Whitewater Park at Pumphouse, thanks to the members of the Colorado Basin Roundtable and the Colorado Water Conservation Board.

At their recent board meeting, the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) members awarded Grand County \$500,000 from the Water Supply Reserve Account (WSRA) to help construct whitewater features in the Colorado River at the popular BLM recreational boating site west of Kremmling.

Over \$39 million has been awarded to hundreds of water projects across the state since the WSRA's inception by the Colorado Legislature in 2007. This is the first award for a project that is primarily for recreational purposes.

"The time has come to recognize non-consumptive water rights have a place at the table in Colorado," said CWCB's Colorado Basin Director Russell George. "Just a few years ago, this would have been inconceivable, but we're evolving."

"Recreation is a huge part of our local and state economy," said Grand County Commissioner James Newberry. "We are grateful to the CWCB Board members for recognizing the economic value of whitewater boating on the Colorado River."

Newberry, who is also chair of the Colorado River District board, emphasized that working together to recognize interests and benefits on both sides of the divide is the only way to get large water projects moved forward.

The proposed \$1.7 million whitewater park will take at least another couple years to bring to fruition. Partnerships with other funders are needed to leverage the major investment Grand County has made to date. Approximately \$500,000 more must be raised from boaters and other partners before construction can begin.

The Colorado Water Conservation Board members noted the broad and diverse support for the project. Endorsements for the grant came from Denver Water, Northwest Colorado Council of Governments, Colorado River District, Eagle County Commissioners, Summit County Commissioners, Eagle River Water & Sanitation District, Colorado Trout Unlimited and American Whitewater. Additionally, over 100 boaters sent passionate letters of support to CWCB for the project. During the 2012 Gorefest Race, kayakers enthusiastically pledged funds to help Grand County build the park.

This major capital investment in recreation infrastructure is expected to create a good financial return for Grand County and the State of Colorado. According to the 2012 Year End Commercial River Use Report just released by the Colorado River Outfitters Association, commercial boating on the Upper Colorado River through Grand County, Eagle County and Glenwood Springs already provides an economic impact of over \$32 million annually to the state. In 2012, there were 39,645 commercial passengers and about 40,000 private boaters who floated this reach. Only the Arkansas River had more users.

The accessible new feature on the Upper Colorado River above Launch #2 at Pumphouse will provide additional opportunities for kayakers and stand-up paddle boarders to perfect their skills. This park-and-play whitewater park will be situated between the exhilarating Class IV-V Gore Canyon run and the splashy, scenic Class II-III section below Pumphouse. Even in low water years, this family-friendly reach has consistent flows all summer due to upstream reservoir releases for farmers and other downstream water users in the Colorado Basin.

To learn more about how you can help Grand County bring the Gore Canyon Whitewater Park to life, contact project coordinator CarolineBradford@wildblue.net.

This is part of a series of articles coordinated by the Water Center at Colorado Mesa University in cooperation with the Colorado and Gunnison Basin Roundtables to raise awareness about water needs, uses and policies in our region. To learn more about the basin roundtables and statewide water planning, and to let the roundtables know what you think, go to www.coloradomesa.edu/WaterCenter.

Caroline Bradford is the coordinator for Gore Canyon Whitewater Park.