

Grand buoys hopes for whitewater park

Tonya Bina

tbina@skyhidailynews.com

Kremmling, CO Colorado

Courtesy photo

KREMMLING – Boaters on the Colorado River in Grand County one day may see an exciting new feature – pending fundraising, permitting and water-court hurdles.

A manmade play wave, fashioned with rocks and concrete boulders in the river, would be the first whitewater park in Grand County. Such play waves attract paddlers from far and wide.

It is planned to be located at Pumphouse, the popular Bureau of Land Management boating site on the Colorado River west of Kremmling off the Trough Road, between the Gore Canyon's class 4-5 rapids and the splashy, family friendly class 2-3 section below Pumphouse.

The Pumphouse site is already developed with a parking area and bathrooms, and is a strong location for boaters late in the season due to upstream reservoir releases. It also is deemed fitting for an activity that is becoming a popular spectator sport.

World Championships in whitewater take place world-wide, and towns such as Vail, Steamboat Springs, Glenwood Springs, Durango, Salida and Golden feature whitewater competitions and festivals surrounding features they have built, capturing boaters' spending dollars.

Rising economic tide

"It's a growing segment of the whitewater industry," said Nathan Fey of American Whitewater, one organization that has shown its support of Grand County's efforts to create the feature.

Such river water parks especially appeal to freestyle kayakers and stand-up paddleboarders who "surf" the wave. Users navigate upstream in a whitewater park, with activity circulating in a concentrated area. Rafters see it as another fun feature to boat through, and usually fly anglers "are attracted to these spots because the fish like to hang out there because there's a lot of diversity in the current," said Jason Carey, principal river engineer of River Restoration in Glenwood Springs. Carey has already designed about 30 percent of the Pumphouse project to aid Grand County's efforts to gain water-rights approval, he said.

Recreational flows

Grand County is seeking water rights attached to the whitewater park at Pumphouse and a potential feature – someday in the future – at Hot Sulphur Springs, which the town has indicated it favors having as an attraction, according to Grand County Manager Lurline Underbrink Curran.

The county, with help from hired Project Coordinator Caroline Bradford of Eagle, established these locations as most-preferred among actual users of the river by conducting a series of meetings and reaching out to boaters across the state. Bradford received more than 100 letters in favor of the park, she said. "Those letters helped us to focus on Pumphouse," she said. About two letters were opposed, with one against creating more traffic at Pumphouse.

The county is seeking river flows varying from 800-1,200 cfs, depending on the time of year between April and October, for recreational use on the Colorado River. The rights are still pending in District 5 Colorado Water Court, and Underbrink Curran said the county has satisfied the concerns of all but three objectors.

Water attorneys for the county are “optimistic,” Underbrink Curran said. They have indicated they are “confident that they have a good opportunity to settle with the objectors,” two of which are Colorado Springs Utilities and Climax. The county has until April 2014 to settle.

“Anything that adds to the recreational magnet is a good thing for the entire county,” Underbrink Curran said, and Grand County’s citizens can benefit from keeping more water in the river.

Financing

Financing the \$1.7 million project remains another hurdle. Grand County has pledged \$600,000 and is using a chunk of that to pay for the legal process of obtaining water rights.

Last week, Bradford announced a “a huge step forward” for the park when the Colorado Water Conservation Board committed a \$500,000 grant toward the project from its Water Supply Reserve Account. Although more than \$39 million has been awarded to hundreds of water projects across the state since the fund’s inception in 2007, it was the first time the board awarded money for a recreation project.

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

The job of the board is to protect water rights in the state, Underbrink Curran said, and to make sure they are available for future development. Recreational water rights having the same beneficial use as rights for sewer and domestic or agricultural water is a “fairly new concept in water law,” the manager said.

The Board was an objector to Grand County’s rights for a Recreational Inchannel Diversion, but has since signed off on the project. Grand County conceded to carving out 3,000 acre-feet “to allow that much for development to go on and not call out our water right on it,” Underbrink Curran said.

“In a multi-tiered process, the project was unanimously approved by the members of the Colorado Basin Roundtable in July 2012, according to Bradford, then forwarded to the Colorado Water Conservation Board for consideration.

“Folks from all across the basin supported Grand County’s application,” said Grand County Commissioner Gary Bumgarner, the at-large representative to the Roundtable. “There’s a lot of additional benefits to the region that were negotiated with this project.”

Meanwhile, fundraising continues to see the project to fruition. Bradford is charged with leading the effort to raise another \$500,000 to \$600,000 from within the boater community and from other partners, she said.

Work on the project will be overseen by both the Bureau of Land Management and the Army Corps of Engineers, according to Carey, and the county will be applying for appropriate permitting. The process will involve public comment periods.

Construction of the project would take place during a three to four month window, taking into account the sensitivity of the river, he said. The project would involve diverting the river channel around the work area.

Work won’t start, however, until “all the necessary permits, funding and approvals are in place,” Bradford said. If all the necessary elements do fall into place, that could be as early as fall 2014, she said.

— Tonya Bina can be reached at 970-887-3334 ext. 19603