

Grant fuels whitewater park plans for county

Fundraising to include asking boaters for contributions

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More information

What: Proposed whitewater park at Pumphouse.

Where: Grand County, northeast of State Bridge.

Cost: \$1.7 million.

Estimated opening: Spring 2015.

EAGLE COUNTY — A recent grant has given a big boost to a proposed whitewater park at the Pumphouse Recreation Area northeast of State Bridge.

The grant came from the Colorado Water Conservation Board, a state agency that awarded Grand County \$500,000. Add in a \$600,000 grant from Grand County — where the recreation area is located — and the project is about two-thirds of the way to the estimated \$1.7 million tab for construction.

Project coordinator Caroline Bradford said the remainder of that money will be solicited from Eagle County as well as outfitters, gear makers and suppliers.

Boaters may be willing to open their wallets. Bradford said she wandered the campground at Pumphouse during the Gorefest event last summer and came away with pledges from individuals adding up to nearly \$1,500.

Darryl Bangert, owner of Sage Outdoor Adventures, said his company would probably be willing to make a donation to the cause. Bangert said a whitewater park at Pumphouse could be a real draw an already popular boat launching area. As proposed, the park would be a short paddle upstream from the second of the area's three launch sites, and a quick float downstream from the first. That kind of access would keep kayakers and stand-up paddleboard riders in the area all day, he said.

Otto Andl owns the Colorado River Center — Rancho del Rio — just downstream from Pumphouse. He agreed with Bangert that the project — estimated to start work in 2014 and open to public use the following spring — would draw more people to the area. That could be good for private camping at Andl's place and, perhaps, drive a bit more business at the center's small store.

But, Andl added, the whitewater park will also help preserve river flows, especially late in the year.

The reason is that after a couple of years of work in the state's water court system, the park now has its very own water right — water legally dedicated to a particular purpose. For years, state water managers, including members of the state's water conservation board, opposed that kind of water right, but times have changed.

“The board has evolved, and the board has tried to reflect the times,” said Russell George, who represents the upper Colorado River area on the state board. That change happened slowly, George said.

The reason, Bradford said, is that state water managers for decades saw water rights as something to

use either for agriculture or some kind of residential or business development.

The idea of keeping water in a stream just for recreational use was anathema to that kind of thinking.

But, George said, in the 15 years or more since the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that “recreational” uses were legitimate grounds to grant water rights, that idea has faded.

In fact, George said, the idea of dedicating water for a whitewater park wasn't a tough sell at all to the rest of the board. Still, this is the first time the state board has provided money to a project like this.

“Because it was new, we spent a lot of time making sure we were dotting all the i's and crossing all the t's,” George said.

The result, Bradford said, will be something special, both for boaters and those involved with dividing up the state's water supplies.

“People upstream will still be able to develop and users downstream will still be able to divert water for agriculture,” she said.

And a part of the river will be available to more people, more often.