



The “Water Park” Whistle By Rhona Baron

The river flowed around the bend below Wenatchee River Institute last Wednesday night, the roar of rapids muting our icy footsteps as we approached The Barn. Jammed with locals, elected officials and guests, the crowd listened respectfully as Erin McKay, Senior Natural Resource Specialist with Chelan County led the informational presentation titled “Leavenworth Mill Dam Rehabilitation and Recreation Improvement Project” or LMDRRIP. At stake: Barn Beach, a short, beloved stretch of the Wenatchee River a stone’s throw distant, a place sometimes referred to as “Locals’ Beach.”

The gathering was the result of a trickle that began six years ago when Chelan county’s Natural Resources Department, in the course of updating their comprehensive plan, solicited input from the community to shape action items. Seventy-seven detailed comments were received from both county residents and those living across Washington State, including many about whitewater recreation on the Wenatchee River. Most comments (70%) seemed organized around one message: build a whitewater park in the Wenatchee and tie it to the removal of the Dryden dam, a structure proven to be lethal to river users.

Since then, the County has taken that input for more safety and river recreation to heart. Under the direction of Mike Kaputa, Chelan County Natural Resources Director, the program has explored not only the Dryden Dam as an option for a whitewater park, but several other stretches of river for comparison. Our Valley Our Future, partially funded the \$80,000 feasibility study. After the PUD and the Yakima Nation weighed in, only one location remained on the table. Thus, Leavenworth listened and viewed images for approximately 50 minutes followed by about 20 minutes of audience comments as we considered a possible “play wave” feature and rehabilitation of the historic mill dam that formed the sandy curve of Barn Beach. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of voices were against the LMDRRIP (we could call this one “Let ’Em Drip”). But I digress because many meeting attendees would simply like to see the proposal RIP. Forever.

Today the Whistle encourages the community to step back to view the big picture. Don't throw the Leavenworth Mill Dam project out with the... river water. Instead, let's consider the three pieces involved. There is no need to conflate those pieces. As Ms. McKay stressed, the project is scaleable.

First, the basic situation on the river near Barn Beach in two words. Tuber take-out. Thousands of them every summer, with attitudes ranging from respectful to “let’s party” as floaters bump over anadromous salmon habitat on their way downstream from Icicle Road bridge. The County and City have been working on river recreation management for some time as the City owns the property at take-out and the County has the means to make improvements. We await the basic steps of adequate signage, permanent

toilets if possible and a single trail back to the parking lot, instead of the current trampling of riparian habitat.

Secondly, The Whistle encourages the community to learn more about habitat restoration and remediation at the mill dam site. Rusty spikes, old pilings originally saturated with creosote and the ribs of the dam remain in the river. The removal of these items is the typical purview of Chelan County's Natural Resources Department, with their focus on rehabilitation including water quality, forest health and salmon habitat. According to Ms. McKay, the rehabilitation of this area will not affect the swimming beach around the corner and will be grant funded.

Sadly, the Wenatchee River has also lost the majority of salmon "pull outs" or side channels for young fish, places they can rest as they begin their journey down the river to the sea. Part of the LMDRRIP proposes creating a flood zone pool which would aid fish. The pool would be similar to the shallow pools on Blackbird Island that provide excellent habitat. We believe this is a worthwhile objective.

Finally, let's look at the play feature in the river. When you are considering the reshaping of the river bottom to accommodate kayakers, boogie boarders and other ways locals might enjoy the resulting waves during the spring and fall seasons of mid flow, keep in mind several points. Recreation Improvement in this location will require much further study, will not be limited to local use, will create an increase in parking demand and could potentially change the river bed both upstream and down. Construction would occur in fall, during salmon migration and potentially impact the anadromous runs annually. Consider that, to date, virtually no examples can be found of constructing any kind of white water park in a river that hosts anadromous salmon. Understandably, the Yakima Nation is firmly against this third portion of the project. While the Whistle appreciates the enjoyment and human enhancement that intentional wave shaping provides, we do not support Barn Beach as an appropriate location.

This column's Whistelist has one item:

1. **Get Informed and Speak Out:** There is no firm date for decision on the LMDRRIP. But you can contact the mayor, city administrator and council NOW regarding tuber and other recreational use on the Wenatchee River. Include your thoughts on "tuber take-out."

We live in a great community, favored by the restorative beauty of nature. Let's take our deepest wishes seriously. Believe your voice counts. Until next time, find our current poll online in the Echo, and keep whistling. We'll hear you!