

Clark: Fort Collins whitewater park an idea worth exploring

Written by Jim Clark Visit Fort Collins

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I recently made my first trip to Salida in years. If you've not been to this gem on the Arkansas River lately, you're in for a treat. Downtown Salida is a delightful small arts and outdoor community.

One of the town's highlights is the Salida Whitewater Park. The park sees kayakers throughout the day, along with many more folks watching from the riverbanks. It creates a unique atmosphere that brings people to the lifeblood of the valley, the Arkansas River. The area was long neglected and abused until 2000, when the park helped lead a downtown renaissance.

The city of Fort Collins is in the process of considering major improvements to the Poudre River District between where the river crosses Shields and Mulberry streets. When I first arrived in Fort Collins almost nine years ago, the Poudre River became — and remains — one of my favorite places to spend time.

But I always wondered why the river was in such an unattractive state through the city. Having spent my career working to grow and develop destination assets, it became obvious that the stretch of the Poudre downtown Fort Collins was a river in need of some love and attention.

In 2011, Colorado State University professor John Loomis conducted an economic assessment of the potential benefits of a downtown whitewater park. I've worked with Loomis on research projects in the past, and he is well schooled in outdoor recreation and tourism.

The Loomis study predicts that an additional 4,000-7,000 people would visit Fort Collins to use the park, increasing annual spending in the city by between about \$170,000 and \$400,000, depending on river flows. That's not counting additional recreation made available to residents who would benefit from this resource.

If you ever watch a Colorado Rockies game on television or have visited the big REI store in Denver, you'll often see paddlers enjoying Confluence Park. Take a visit to Golden and you'll see a frequently used whitewater park that serves as a major downtown gathering point.

Amenities like these are the type of highlights that attract visitors, appear in photos and television and show up in on YouTube and social media. They're fun. And cool.

Waterfronts attract people. There's something soothing about sitting along the banks of a river or a shore, watching boats go by.

Certainly a whitewater park will require study of its feasibility and environmental impact. I know little about the engineering and physical requirements of such a facility. But I think it's an option well worth considering.

Starting at 5 p.m. Sept. 5, the city will host a series of open houses at the Lincoln Center to discuss plans for the river. A 5 p.m. session will discuss whitewater opportunities and constraints, followed by a session from 6-8 p.m. about opportunities for recreation, habitat and flows.

As the potential for this project unfolds, I and many in the world of tourism believe this is the time to consider expanding recreational offerings on the Poudre as it flows through the city, the downtown in particular.

If Denver, Golden and Salida can benefit, perhaps we can, too.

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