The Boise River Greenbelt: Polishing a Community Gem

The valley’s unique park provides a scenic pathway and river access.

Treasure Valley residents and visitors alike love the Greenbelt, the 25-mile pathway along the Boise River that provides biking and walking paths and a buffer between the river and the community just beyond its banks. But while the 45-year-old landmark continues to be a selling point for the livability of the area, Boise Parks and Recreation, which maintains the majority of the path, was unsure exactly how or when residents were accessing it.

Working with the parks department, the Community and Regional Planning program at Boise State University analyzed two surveys of Greenbelt users to answer this question. In 2012 and 2013, users were questioned about their Greenbelt habits on both a Tuesday and a Saturday each year, thus allowing organizers to capture information from commuters and recreational users. Results will be used to shape future improvements, including possible expansion and additional services.

“Our research offered a brief look into the complex relationships Boiseans have established with their Greenbelt,” said Andrew Crisp, a graduate fellow in the Community and Regional Planning program. “Our work came straight from the horse’s mouth, so to speak—we avoided the typical top-down approach of analyzing patterns and equations in favor of soliciting input directly from users. Overall we found this piece of infrastructure mattered to the people who use it—from families on weekend walks to dedicated sports enthusiasts and everyone in between.”

Data from the surveys show clear differences in how this innovative parkland is used on weekdays and weekends, as well as its use throughout the day. It is accessed by pedestrians, runners, bicyclists and skaters, by young and old and as a corridor and a destination. It has proved itself to be a positive investment in the community and a tribute to those who first envisioned it at a time when the river was anything but picturesque.
What Boiseans now treasure as an essential part of the city’s character was once just a dumping ground – literally. The Boise River, which runs through the heart of town and now boasts miles of beloved biking and hiking paths, was for years the collection point for raw sewage, abandoned refrigerators and rusting car bodies. It also was notorious for its tendency to flood and refusal to traverse a singular channel through the city.

J. Meredith “J.M.” Neil noted this problem in his manuscript titled City Limits, about Boise’s metropolitan growth from 1945-2000. A Boise-born historian from Washington State University, Neil wrote that: “Even when years passed without a flood its meandering lines wobbled all of the way to the base of the Bench, leaving a cluster of islands barely rising above several side channels.”

Valley farmers were resigned to water flooding their fields, followed by removal of debris and replanting. Susan M. Stacy, in her history of the river titled When the River Rises: Flood Control on the Boise River 1943-1985, noted their accord on needed improvements. “They agreed that the river needed to be maintained, cleaned of debris, straightened out at some of its bends, made wider and in some places deeper.”

It wasn’t until 1949 that the Army Corps of Engineers took action, beginning construction of Lucky Peak Dam. When it opened in 1955, it helped carve a channel for the river and control flow, especially during spring snowmelt and flash floods caused by excessive rainfall.

Despite flooding concerns, the river was recognized by some early in the city’s history as an attractive selling point. As early as 1910 a high-end 24-block subdivision was proposed for Ridenbaugh Island, across from Julia Davis Park. When developer A.R. Smith was unsuccessful in attracting backers after several years, the plan was scrapped.

The parcel remained undeveloped until the late 1920s. But rather than a high-end neighborhood, the site became the area’s first municipal airport and was an intermediate stop along the inaugural cross-country airmail run operated by Varney Airlines, predecessor of United Airlines.

The deplorable state of the river kept residents away for several decades. Although Julia Davis Park (established in 1907) and Municipal Park (originally established as a tourist campground in 1918) both bordered the river, neither offered beaches nor any sort of public access to the water. And residents and visitors alike were fine with that. Not only was the river an undefined web of tributaries and islands, it was filled with sewage.

In City Limits, Neil noted that in “utter disregard for the river, the town commonly located its dumps along the river as late as 1949.” In fact, in June 1935 two new dumps were announced for the south end of 14th Street and the southeast corner of Municipal Park, both along the banks of the river. Attempts to pass bonds to fund a sewage treatment plant failed in both 1938 and 1940.

Finally, in 1947, a $1.55 million bond passed, due largely to concerns that polio cases afflicting local residents might be tied to river pollution. Two years later, in July 1949, the Boise City Council formally banned all dumping except at approved landfills.

By September 1950, under the headline “River Pollution is ended,” the Idaho Statesman was announcing that “rainbow trout swim in the waters of the river again.”
With a much improved river environment, Boise residents soon turned to the question of how to take advantage of the waterway as a recreational destination, an idea not fully embraced by a community jaded by years of contamination and stink. As early as 1948, a plan had been proposed by Ernest Day and Clayton Davidson to dam the river east of Capitol Boulevard to create a recreational lake. However, that plan was shelved in favor of enlarging the lagoon at Julia Davis Park. Not only was this cheaper, Neil wrote, but “one suspects, it avoided having to get used to the novel idea of using the river itself for recreation.”

Residents could hardly be blamed for their lack of enthusiasm for the river. Stacy, in her book *When the River Rises*, noted that even after the water itself was cleaned up, there was still the issue of fluctuating water flow (depending on the time of year) and the historical use of the riverbanks for decidedly unattractive activity, such as hauling gravel, cattle grazing, lumberyards and food processing.

Completion of Lucky Peak Dam in 1955 provided a more predictable water flow, contributing to the popularity of a new use for the river – tubing. While it is unclear exactly when the tradition – still enjoyed by thousands of residents each year – began, it may have initiated with the July 1959 “Keep Idaho Green” raft race sponsored by the Jaycees. Called “the most disorderly race in the history of Boise” by the *Statesman*, it included a dozen rafts and hundreds of spectators lining the river. By July 1961, rafting and tubing had become an accepted summertime diversion and encouraged a new look at preserving and improving public access to the river.
The Boise River Greenbelt – an Idea is Born

The 1963 Boise City Comprehensive General Plan noted a shift in attitude toward the river as a unique piece of the area’s quality of life. In the section addressing parks and recreation, the authors noted the following:

“Boise City has more than the usual need and opportunity for parks and green areas to serve in this way (provide parks, open space and other public areas). As the Capital City of Idaho and the seat of Ada County government, the City is expected to have dignity and charm. As a city of homes, it should continue to be a delightful place in which to live. Also, because the economy of the area is based largely on trade and commerce attracted from a wide area, and its economic future is partially dependent upon tourist travel and retirement living, Boise City's physical enhancement is a particularly worthwhile community goal.

“The plan envisions a park system comprised of a chain of community parks along the Boise River supplemented by appropriate neighborhood facilities.”

Some of those parks already existed. As previously noted, Julia Davis Park was established in 1907, followed by Municipal Park, which the city purchased and named in 1927. Ann Morrison Park was built in 1959 by Morrison-Knudsen employees in honor of the late wife of company founder Harry W. Morrison.

Other riverside parks are still being developed today as part of the “Ribbon of Jewels” vision of a system of parks united by the Boise River Greenbelt. Other Ribbon of Jewels parks include:

- Kathryn Albertson Park
- Bernardine Quinn Riverside Park
- Esther Simplot Park (undeveloped)
- Marianne Williams Park
- Alta Harris Park (undeveloped)
- Bethine Church River Trail
- Dona Larsen Park

But city leaders were still far from this vision in 1963. Under the direction of Boise Mayor Eugene Shellworth, they labored to realize the goal of a protected riverside that would not only meet...
community demand for aesthetics and recreation, but also protect the newly purified waterway.

The Comprehensive General Plan offered the following ambitious objective (although not until page 37): “It is proposed also that additional land along the Boise River be acquired to link community parks with other public lands forming a continuous green belt available to all sections of the City.” Planners envisioned a ribbon of public lands “stretching along the river throughout the entire length of the community.”

In July 1967, the Greenbelt Development Program fleshed out that idea with a five-year plan for the project that now included a municipal golf course at the far east end.

“The Green Belt will safeguard the Boise River throughout the length of the City, developing it into a major recreational facility. It is deemed to be very important in terms of its stated objectives of protecting the Boise River from pollution and loss of access by unwarranted development. The Green Belt will give continuity to the existing community parks which benefit Boise City as well as tying these parks to the Golf Course as a continual City entity along the Boise River.

“Upon completion of this program, the community will have a continuity of park and Golf Course along the Boise River for a length of approximately five miles. Picnic grounds are proposed to be located, with adjacent parking, approximately 1/2 mile apart along the Green Belt. The width of the Green Belt will be flexible but wide enough to allow trails, paths, landscaping, as well as areas of more intense use.”

On the north side of the Boise River, the proposed path would stretch from the Old Idaho Veterans’ Home east to the end of the golf course, approximately 5.8 miles. On the south side of the river, the path would start at Fairview Avenue and progress east 2.9 miles to Division Street, for a total of 8.7 miles. Cost estimates for the project for 1967 through 1972 totaled $785,775.

Stacy noted that the project kicked off in 1966 with the donation of a .43 acre parcel by the Taubman Corporation. Two more donations followed in 1967 and the “green belt” project was officially launched.

But just two years later, the 1969-74 Capital Improvements Program report created by the Planning and Zoning Commission bewailed the lack of substantial progress on the project. Noting that “municipalities are far behind in acquisition of specific and well-chosen properties for community needs,” report authors encouraged the city to take action swiftly.

“It is the responsibility of the Planning Department to place emphasis upon future needs so that land can be purchased at a time when savings to the taxpayer will be realized. Development of the land will come as needed if the property is available.”

Adjusted costs for land acquisition and development jumped substantially through 1974:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TOTAL ESTIMATED COST</th>
<th>CITY BUDGET SHARE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>$810,920</td>
<td>$319,480</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>$480,150</td>
<td>$309,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>$465,050</td>
<td>$278,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-74</td>
<td>$1,649,180</td>
<td>$1,150,180</td>
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The report continued: “People are often so concerned with industrial and commercial progress that they forget to cultivate the intangible wealth which has a direct bearing on their general wellbeing. Man in pursuit of monetary gain often does not wake up in time to the fact that his rush, for (supposed) progress, has deprived him of all the things he had hoped progress would achieve. It is for that general reason that the river banks are proposed for park development so that the city dweller can loosen the rush of daily activities in a relaxing environment of long footpaths and rest areas from one end of town to the other.”

A Greenbelt and Pathways Committee was appointed in 1969 to shepherd development of this vision, and in 1971, the city adopted an ordinance requiring a minimum setback from the river of 70 feet for all structures and parking areas. By 2001, the 25 miles of Greenbelt pedestrian and bicycle paths in the Boise park system included informational signage letting Greenbelt users find their location and plot their route.
The Greenbelt has helped transform the Boise River from a nuisance to a destination and is a point of pride for the City of Trees, helping it earn a number of spots on “Best” lists, including Best River Town in America (Outside Magazine), Best Cities for Raising a Family (Forbes), Best Places to Live (Livability.com), Best Places to Retire (Forbes), Top 10 Turnaround Towns (CNN Money), Healthiest City (Women’s Health/Men’s Health) and Fittest Towns of the West (Sunset Magazine), among others.

A good point of illustration is Boise State University, which hugs the banks of the Boise River along its southern edge. Constructed beginning in 1941, the first few decades of buildings tended to face away from the water, reserving the river edge for parking and egress for maintenance vehicles.

With the river’s renaissance, the university has embraced the river. In 1977, the Bob Gibb Friendship Bridge was erected to connect the university to Julia Davis Park and the city beyond. The bridge is heavily used by campus and Greenbelt traffic and provides a picturesque northern gateway to the university. In 1984, the Morrison Center was constructed, with its entrance facing the Greenbelt and the river. In 2008, a scenic plaza was constructed to allow visitors to enjoy the river before and after viewing Center productions. And in 2004, new residential halls were erected along the Greenbelt featuring archways opening commuter access to the river.

In 2012, the Boise Parks and Recreation department asked Boise State University’s Department of Community and Regional Planning to analyze its annual survey gauging how the Greenbelt is being used today, and how it could be improved for future users. Associate Professor and Director of the Department of Community and Regional Planning, Dr. Jaap Vos, headed up the project.

On Sept. 18 and 22, 2012, a small army of volunteers spread out along the path from Veterans Park east to Warm Springs. While the Idaho Transportation Department counted bicyclists and pedestrians, the volunteers quizzed passersby on points ranging from when and how often they used the Greenbelt to why and where they accessed it. Because the survey was conducted on both a Saturday and a Tuesday, it was possible to determine weekday and weekend usage and note similarities and differences.

A total of 1,206 surveys were completed, either by hand or online. Results clearly show that users – both pedestrians and bicyclists – see the Greenbelt as an important resource for themselves and for the community as a whole. A second survey, conducted Sept. 17 and 21, 2013, with 1,038 respondents, corroborated these findings.

Results were sometimes surprising and kept surveyors on their toes.

“This project took us beyond the textbook into the complicated real world,” said Jennifer Shelby, a graduate assistant in Boise State’s Community and Regional Planning program. “We had to adjust and adapt as unexpected circumstances arose. We had to approach the results with an open mind and allow our agenda to adjust based on what the data revealed and the patterns that emerged outside of our expectations.”
The following executive summary from the 2013 report gives a general overview of Greenbelt usage:

“The general results are very similar to last year. Users are unanimously happy about the Greenbelt and see the Greenbelt as an important asset for the community. People feel safe and almost 75 percent of the people that were surveyed use the Greenbelt three times a week or more. Just like last year, there were more bicycles on the Greenbelt than pedestrians. Our sample consisted of 44 percent pedestrians and 56 percent bicycles but the [ITD] traffic counts show that the actual numbers are probably closer to 35 percent pedestrians and 65 percent bicycles. By far the most important improvement that both user groups mention is improvement of the surface of the Greenbelt.”

It is interesting to note the sheer number of users every single day. While other parks (and roads) show peak usage at certain times of the day, or on specific days, the Greenbelt sees almost continuous use from sunrise to sunset. Commuters use the path in the early morning and evening, while runners tend to favor the morning hours during the hot summer months and recreational users include morning fitness buffs, midday strollers and errand runners and evening walkers. While the 2012 survey indicated heaviest use on the weekend, the 2013 survey was reversed.

The survey shows that about 25 percent of people who use the Greenbelt drive their car to the path, and the majority of them access the Greenbelt through one of the major city parks. Although almost 40 percent live within a half mile of the Greenbelt, about 50 percent of users live more than a mile way and about 10 percent of Greenbelts users are visitors from out of town.

The survey also showed that the Greenbelt is used differently during the week than on the weekend. In general, people tend to spend more time on the Greenbelt during the weekend, when there are less commuters and more visitors from out of town. And families and individuals are using the Greenbelt much like they use other parks, as a place to enjoy the outdoors and hang out.

City planners from the 1960s would be pleased to know that most users enjoy the Greenbelt as a form of exercise or recreation – both on weekdays and on weekends. And many users say they use the Greenbelt every day or multiple days per week, often for an hour or more at a time and frequently traveling 10 miles or more per trip.

While 40 percent of bicyclists using the Greenbelt during the week are commuting to either work or school, many others are headed to events, restaurants or shopping, proving that the pathway continues to be a resource for both transportation and recreation. And bikes were the top choice for getting to the Greenbelt in both years the data was analyzed – nearly 50 percent of users say they got there on a bike.

The survey also showed that pedestrians and bicyclists easily share the pathway. Pedestrian usage consistently peaks in the morning hours, when temperatures are often more conducive to exercise, while bicycle usage increases later in the day.
The most frequent comments volunteers heard were that users loved the Greenbelt and that it was good for Boise. But as with any civic project, just because it's good doesn’t mean it can’t get better. While survey respondents indicated they felt safe on the Greenbelt, almost one in four indicated they were concerned with bicyclists going too fast or passing in an unsafe manner.

Asked what improvements they would like to see along the Greenbelt, almost half indicated the need for improved surfaces – most likely because so many who responded were on bicycles. Many sections include blacktop cracked by time or warped by the roots of trees lining the river banks. The walking-only 1.6-mile Bethine Church River Trail on the south side of the river from the Cottonwood Apartments to the East Parkcenter Bridge remains wildlife habit and is intentionally unpaved.

In addition to surface improvements, pedestrians were interested in additional amenities, including more restrooms, drinking fountains and trash cans.

Another item at the top of users’ wish lists is the extension of the Greenbelt. While that once seemed certain, environmental concerns have put it in jeopardy. Historian Neil summed it up in the following excerpt from City Limits:

“In the 1990s, it seemed nothing stood in the way of extending the Greenbelt from Lucky Peak Dam to Eagle Island State park, and perhaps all the way to the Snake River at Parma. In 1988 Ada County received a federal grant of $220,000 to complete the section from Barber Park to the Warm Springs Golf Course. A month later, Garden City’s council approved construction of the Greenbelt through its town at an estimated cost of $540,000. In April 1990, the segment from Lake Harbor to Glenwood opened. In July 1992, Boise applied for a federal grant to purchase Greenbelt right of way between Willow Lane and Lake Harbor.

“Downstream from Garden City, the Greenbelt ran into a snag – the protection of wildlife habitat. As the river approaches Eagle Island, it runs through lush wildlife habitat supporting eagles, foxes, deer and more. Greenbelt advocates tended to dismiss concerns as wealthy property owners wishing to bar the public from their land. But wildlife advocates pushed for a plan to relocate the path next to the State Street bypass to avoid disturbing wildlife.”

Ironically, eradication of the pollution that prevented interest in the river as a recreational asset in the first place is now the reason the pathway has been stalled in its westward expansion. The river's current vitality, and its ability to nurture a variety of wildlife ranging from birds of prey to mammals large and small, is a tribute to the vision and determination of generations of Boiseans who dared to look beyond what was and take steps to create what could be.

“The Boise River Greenbelt has long been viewed as an unparalleled public resource,” said Crisp. “It simultaneously provides important environmental assets and recreational amenities, while symbolizing the best work this community is capable of.”

Understanding users’ varying needs and desires for the future of the Greenbelt, he said, can help ensure that this vital resource remains useful for years to come.
| Year | Event
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1862</strong></td>
<td>Boise River floods in the spring, possibly surpassing 100,000 cfs, and flowing two miles wide. Regular flooding continues to occur, inundating agricultural areas and, in 1936, causing two deaths.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1907</strong></td>
<td>Julia Davis Park established.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1918</strong></td>
<td>Tourist campground established along the banks of the Boise River.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1927</strong></td>
<td>Tourist campground purchased by the city and named Municipal Park.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1935</strong></td>
<td>Plans announced for two new dumps along the banks of the Boise River.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1947</strong></td>
<td>Voters approve a bond for a sewage treatment plant.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1949</strong></td>
<td>Dumping officially banned outside of city-approved landfills.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1955</strong></td>
<td>Completion of Lucky Peak Dam allows for greater control of spring snowmelt and flash floods.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1959</strong></td>
<td>A Jaycee-sponsored raft race christens the river for recreation. Ann Morrison Park is built.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1963</strong></td>
<td>A chain of community parks is envisioned along the river banks.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1967</strong></td>
<td>A five-year plan establishes the Greenbelt and a riverside municipal golf course.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1969</strong></td>
<td>Greenbelt and Pathways committee appointed to guide progress on the Greenbelt.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1971</strong></td>
<td>City ordinance carves out a pathway by requiring a 70-foot setback from the river for all structures and parking areas.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1977</strong></td>
<td>Friendship Bridge constructed to span the river and connect Boise State University with Julia Davis Park.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1983</strong></td>
<td>Boise River floods, damaging Greenbelt underpasses.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1989</strong></td>
<td>Kathryn Albertson Park dedicated.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1997</strong></td>
<td>Land donated for Bernardine Quinn Riverside Park.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2001</strong></td>
<td>New signage provides location and distance information.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>Land donated for 70-acre Marianne Williams Park.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2007</strong></td>
<td>Garden City blocks Greenbelt biking through Riverside Village.</td>
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<td><strong>2008</strong></td>
<td>20-acre Alta Harris Park announced.</td>
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<td><strong>2009</strong></td>
<td>Section of Greenbelt named for Bethine Church.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2012</strong></td>
<td>Dona Larsen Park dedicated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2014</strong></td>
<td>Greenbelt extends from Lucky Peak to Eagle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sources Cited


Neil, J. Meredith “J.M.” *City Limits* (unpublished manuscript), chapters 2 and 17.


