

Inter-city waterway stays on drawing board

By JOHN MILLS
For the Emerald

Eugeneans soon may go 'cruisin' down the canal

Imagine commuters plying their way into Eugene in colored gondolas, passing people fishing, bathers and waterfowl on the way.

Such a scene is not just familiar to residents of the charming canal cities of Europe, such as Bruges, Amsterdam, or Venice.

Already, a dozen or so American cities with unromantic names such as Laredo, Kansas City, Charlotte and Cuyhoga Falls have taken another look at slime-clogged drainage ditches just beyond everyone's backyard and asked, "what are we waiting for?"

Using some ingenuity and a lot of "spreading the word," residents of these cities have worked to interconnect a creek here, a ditch there with a river or lake to turn a flood-control system of the 1940s into a benefit-packed amenity of the '80s and beyond.

Not many Eugene residents are aware of the Emerald Waterways Citizens Committee and its plans to connect the Amazon Canal with the Millrace via a new Emerald Canal — a plan that may make canoes as popular as bikes for transportation.

Supporters of the plan include Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore., Rep. Jim Weaver, D-Ore., the state's fish and wildlife department, the Lane County Board of Commissioners, Eugene City Council members and the Eugene Register-Guard.

Last May the EWCC had 150 members, but since then Eugene lawyer Charles Porter and Jerry Diethelm, head of the University's landscape architecture department, have offered a slide presentation about the waterway to interested groups.

To date, several Eugene neighborhood groups have seen the presentation and have given their support to the project. Diethelm says the secret is to have people see the plans and from there the vision of the waterway speaks eloquently for itself.

The waterway plans include a "Y" that joins the Amazon Canal with the Millrace at a junction near 17th Avenue and Pearl Street. The Amazon Canal branch starts in southeast Eugene and the Millrace branch

begins near the Willamette River.

The seven-block gap from the Millrace to the junction of the "Y" would be the proposed Emerald Canal. The stem of the "Y" would run westward toward downtown, then eight miles to Fern Ridge Reservoir.

"It is because (the Amazon Canal) has been neglected for so long that makes it the perfect opportunity now," says Hank Murrow, a Far West Neighborhood leader. Most of the land in the project is publicly owned so the opportunity for a parkway is readily available.

Lane County has recently added its support to the project by obtaining water rights from the state to divert water from the Willamette River to the Millrace and, eventually, to the Amazon Canal during the summer.

The extra flow will keep the waterway clear of sediment and make it large enough for fish and boats. The flow will empty into Fern Ridge Reservoir, increasing summer recreation uses.

As the project moves from the drawing board toward becoming reality, the feasibility of using the proposed Emerald Canal for flood control remains a question. The Army Corps of Engineers is conducting a study, initiated by Hatfield, to

determine if the canal is the best alternative to handle a recognized flood hazard.

The Corps has predicted that a major flood would put an eight-block area along the Amazon Canal under water because of heavy sediment clogging it.

Porter and Diethelm say the waterway is a unique solution to the problem of maintaining Eugene's liveability in the face of increasing population growth. If preventing urban sprawl across the region's farmland is a desirable goal, more people must be housed within the city, the two say in the waterway proposal.

If these people look for recreational opportunities and open space close to home, the waterway also provides the community with an opportunity for lively housing designs and mall-like plazas that focus on the attraction people have for water.

And the project also offers

outdoor-oriented Eugeneans another attraction — canoeists would be able to paddle more than 18 miles of canals that connect to still longer trips.

If the Corps decides to build the Emerald Canal — their answer is expected in January — the next step will be to develop a special zone for the waterway and to obtain about \$10 million from funding

sources other than the Corps.

A multitude of sources exist, but applications for the funds have not been made pending the corps' decision.

The entire project could be sidelined if the corps decides the Emerald Canal is not feasible.

If events fall into place as planned, Eugene's future waterway system may become the talk of the town in Bruges, Belgium.

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