



THE WILLAMETTE RIVER
RUNNING THROUGH
GLENWOOD CIRCA 1973.
PHOTO TAKEN FOR THE
WILLAMETTE GREENWAY
PROJECT.

'Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour, and is not reminded of the flux of all things? Throw a stone into the stream, and the circles that propagate themselves are the beautiful type of all influence.'

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*

Riverfront Conversations

COULD COLLABORATION BRING A HEALTHIER RIVERFRONT? — BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Sit beside the river and sip a glass of wine after a long day at work. Lay yourself down by the river and relax after a long run. Go fishing, go rafting, go wading, go birdwatching.

As winter slowly starts to wind down, our river dreams start to flow. The Willamette River winds through Eugene and Springfield, and the McKenzie flows on the outskirts of town, but how often do we really see it from our urban streets?

Historically, city dwellers in Eugene and Springfield didn't really view the riverfront as something to preserve for its clean water or ecological values, nor did they see it as a place to put cafés or open spaces to enjoy the scenery. The urban riverfront, prone to flooding, became home to gravel pits, dumps and industrial sites in Lane County's early days.

But when the Willamette's dams were completed in the 1960s, flooding was reduced (sadly, so was the salmon population) and the nature of riverfront development was primed for change. Fifty years later, it hasn't changed that much. Gravel pits still pockmark the Willamette in north Eugene, and Glenwood's riverfront is industrial and hemmed in with rip-rapped rock.

Now, as the city of Springfield envisions a new Glenwood riverfront, and as the UO Foundation looks

to develop the Eugene Water and Electric Board site and as more opportunities arrive to bring the riverfront to the public eye, the question arises: Will the communities of Eugene and Springfield take up the challenge to not merely build along the river but protect it and connect it to the surrounding community? Is the answer a river commission, committee or study group?

'A river is more than an amenity — it is a treasure that offers a necessity of life that must be rationed among those who have the power over it.'

— Oliver Wendell Holmes,
U.S. Supreme Court Justice

Whether you are drinking from them (as water, beer or whiskey), building alongside them or working to preserve them, Lane County's peaceful rivers are a controversial subject, leading easily to fighting and disagreements. But in order to preserve the river and its beauty, people, agencies and municipalities need to get along to some degree. Bringing up the idea of a committee to guide how the area's riverfront develops arouses painful memories of past attempts to protect Eugene's drinking water.

Eugene gets its water from the McKenzie, some of which flows through the Willamette National Forest and some of which flows through Lane County lands. In 2010, Lane County attempted to protect water quality, health and property by limiting future development in the floodway, floodplain and riparian area. A furor arose among homeowners, and 400 angry people showed up at a meeting to discuss the plan. Not long after the crowd attempted to force a recital of the Pledge of Allegiance, the proposal was tabled by the Lane County Commission.

Mentioning a commission or a committee to guide riverfront development stirs up those bad memories for people like Joe Moll of the McKenzie River Trust. His nonprofit has worked to restore gravel pits near its Green Island property at the McKenzie River's confluence with the Willamette north of Eugene as well as collaborated with EWEB to create the Berggren Demonstration Farm, which showcases the connections between clean water and farming.

A commission could add value to policy makers by providing distilled, thoughtful information, Moll says, despite his caution. "I'd love to see the ends that a well-functioning board could produce."

Committees in the past have been successful at protecting the waterways. In the 1960s and '70s as the dams sprang up, so did the idea of the Willamette Greenway, a state and