



Jamie Hale/The Oregonian

Kayakers paddle up the Willamette River toward Willamette Falls in Oregon City, seen from the old Blue Heron paper mill site, now owned by the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

Willamette Falls riverwalk project on hold

Grand Ronde tribe leaves partnership

By JAMIE HALE
The Oregonian

Anyone hoping for a new public riverwalk to Willamette Falls in Oregon City will need to hold out hope for a little — or maybe a lot — longer.

Despite roughly a decade of work and nearly \$40 million of public funding that resulted in eye-catching renderings once displayed proudly at public events, the Willamette Falls Legacy Project has yet to break ground on the much-anticipated riverwalk that would finally give the public a close-up view of Willamette Falls.

The long-awaited project at the old Blue Heron paper mill site remains on hold indefinitely, as partners work to reorganize the structure of the intergovernmental collaboration, which has comprised as many as nine local, state and tribal government entities.

Earlier this month, the partnership received a blow when the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde announced it was leaving the Willamette Falls Legacy Project because of bureaucratic gridlock. The tribe owns the property where the public riverwalk will be built using an easement, and is working on a multiphase development that will include a separate cultural and community center of its own at the site.

“For nearly 10 years, we have watched as little progress at Willamette Falls occurred while significant public resources have been spent,” Cheryle Kennedy, tribal council chairwoman for the Grand Ronde tribe, wrote in a letter to Willamette Falls Legacy Project partners on March 17. “As a result, and after careful consideration, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde will no longer participate in discussions around the Willamette Falls Legacy Project.”

Sara Thompson, spokesperson for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, confirmed the tribe will continue to work with local government agencies on the various projects at Willamette Falls — just not as a part of the Willamette Falls Legacy Project.

“Grand Ronde has always collaborated closely with local, state and federal agencies engaged in projects within its ceded lands,” Thompson wrote in an email. “This move does not change that commitment.”

The remaining partners, which include Oregon City, Clackamas County, Metro and the state, as well as the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, have said they plan to continue work on the riverwalk — though details for that plan remain elusive.

Organizing multiple government agencies and sovereign nations on a large-scale public works project is hard enough, let alone doing so at a site of great cultural importance that touches on simmering intertribal conflict. The Willamette Falls Legacy Project partners expressed confidence that the riverwalk will eventually be complete, but the current roadblocks are hard to ignore.

Clackamas County Commissioner Martha Schrader, who has been working with the partnership, said despite the setbacks she’s optimistic about the future of the Willamette Falls Legacy Project. She said her two decades of experience in local government have shown that complex projects take time and usually endure complications along the way.

“It is not out of the ordinary to see these kinds of blips happen. You take 10 steps forward and five back,” she said. “I think of this not in terms of one or two years, I think of this in terms of five, 10, 15 years — 20 years.”

Schrader said while she remains confident about the future of the riverwalk, the partners need to address the complications that have the project stuck on hold — namely the partnership itself.



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An aerial view of Willamette Falls and the former Blue Heron paper mill.

Yuxing Zheng, a spokesperson for Metro, said the agency is working through some challenging questions about the project’s governance following the departure of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. Metro’s involvement has hinged upon collaboration with all five tribes, she said.

“It’s really important that we try to get the approach right,” Zheng said.

Kristin Brown, communications coordinator for Oregon City, said any decisions about the project will be unanimous, and that the partners hope to sort out the lingering organizational issues at the next meeting — though no date for that meeting has been set.

“Listening to what all our partners have to say is very important,” Brown said. “So it’s paramount that everybody get in the room together.”

The Willamette Falls Legacy Project had finalized plans for the riverwalk before the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde purchased the land in 2019 for \$15.25 million from Washington developer George Heidergerken, who had also been working with the partnership on redeveloping the site.

After the land changed hands, the riverwalk was redesigned to jibe with Grand Ronde’s new vision for the old Blue Heron site, and at the start of 2021, the partners agreed on a new plan. That summer, however, the project was put on hold as the Willamette Falls Legacy Project added all five tribes to the partnership, following a request from the Willamette Falls Trust, a nonprofit that has raised private money for the riverwalk and promotes intertribal collaboration to complete it.

All five tribes cite ancestral connections to Willamette Falls, and therefore have a vested interest in the site, they say, though the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde is the only tribe that owns property at the falls.

In their recent announcement to leave the partnership, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde complained that the addition of the other tribes led to prolonged gridlock, slowing down the project while “not yielding any benefits to the public.”

Robert Kentta, Willamette Falls Trust board chair and councilman for the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians, issued a letter hours later in response to Grand Ronde’s announcement, arguing for the importance of inter-tribal collaboration.

“The inclusion of all tribes with deep spiritual, historical, cultural and legal connections to (the) Falls is an important step for this project and should be a common practice at this place,” Kentta wrote. “As with any multi-government collaboration, there have been challenges, yet participation in these conversations is key to success and healing.”

Both letters prodded old wounds between the tribes involved, though neither addressed the conflict directly. The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde has long asserted that it has ancestral rights to control access at Willamette Falls, a claim the other four tribes contest. Regardless, Grand Ronde maintains greater control of the site as owners of the land adjacent to the Oregon City side of falls.

Following its departure from the Willamette Falls Legacy Project, Grand Ronde said it maintains an open-door policy when it comes to working with other governments, including tribal governments, but stopped short of committing to a full intertribal collaboration at Willamette Falls.

Development of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde’s planned cultural and community center at Willamette Falls, which could include restaurants, lodging and viewpoints, is coming along, though much work remains between the demolition of old mill buildings and the construction of new ones, the tribe said.

Meanwhile, the Willamette Falls Legacy Project remains on hold, as partners try to figure out how to proceed with what has proven to be an enormously complex undertaking.

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