

The potential of a 'green belt' brings out volunteer spirit

By Ellie Rodgers - Idaho Statesman

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As word of a Boise River greenbelt spread through restaurants, boardrooms and offices, a man named Bill Onweiler was beginning his first run for City Council.

He lost the race in 1963, but businessmen and politicians whom he met while campaigning gave him an earful about urban renewal in the core of the city. Residents told him they wanted parks and bike paths.

Onweiler ran for City Council again in 1965, campaigning on a platform that included the idea of preserving open space within the city.

He was elected and, in January 1966, became liaison to the Parks & Recreation and Planning departments, where he met two men he later described as "remarkable" city employees: Parks Director Gordon Bowen and Planning Director Arlo Nelson.

Nelson was already steeped in greenbelt planning. His department already had held its first public meeting on the greenbelt concept, and Nelson had created a map detailing Boise, Ada County and Garden City lands along the river. He'd colored the greenbelt red on the map, so it would stand out dramatically when he gave presentations.

Nelson estimated the cost of acquiring and developing 52 properties along the river - all the land he believed was needed - would be \$945,000. Onweiler, now retired and living in Rancho Mirage, Calif., said prospects for publicly funding the greenbelt were grim because most politicians at the time were interested in cutting city budgets.

"No one wanted to put in a dime," Onweiler said.

The City Council plowed ahead. On Jan. 24, 1966, the council adopted "The Boise River Greenbelt Plan," and Mayor Jay Amyx appointed Onweiler, Ferd Koch and City Councilman Sherm Perry to a committee to wrangle commitments for state and private lands. The State Land and Water Conservation Fund was targeted as a source of matching money.

Onweiler and Perry knew finding money for the project would be tough. They also knew they needed community support if the Greenbelt, as it had become known, was to succeed.

"We saw the way to sell it was to sell service clubs on the idea," Onweiler said.

Onweiler turned to a couple of friends for help, Boise Airport Manager Don Duvall and Channel 2 reporter Garth Andrews. Duvall arranged a helicopter. Andrews brought along a camera.

Andrews strapped himself in so he could hang halfway out of the helicopter to shoot. Two runs down the river provided the footage Onweiler and Perry sought. They trotted the film and a presentation about the Greenbelt to clubs all over the city, asking groups to support it.

"We had people remark they'd never looked at the river before," Onweiler said.

Soon, groups from the Sierra Club to the Boy Scouts were holding cleanups along the river. The Kiwanis Club removed poison oak.

Onweiler dragged his children all over the future Greenbelt.

"We ate with bugs in the Old Soldiers Home area, crawled over barbed wire buried back of a business at the Fairview bridge and were run off by shotgun from the Farmers Canal near the river, " Onweiler wrote in a 1987 letter to his children, apologizing for all the time spent away from the family while he worked on the project.

At Bowen's urging, Onweiler and Perry traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with Sens. Frank Church and Len Jordan. The men returned to Boise with a commitment for \$100,000, in return for which the Greenbelt would have to connect the major parks in the city. If that happened, additional funds would be available, Onweiler recalled.

Another group, the Boise Allied Arts Council, was throwing its wholehearted support behind the project.

"We decided we had to do something to clean up the raw sewage in the river, " recalled George Whitmore, a Boise rancher who served on the arts council at the time.

Another arts council member, architect Bradford Paine Shaw, also emerged as a key player.

Shaw was a member of the Boise City Park Board, along with Alice Dieter, Stan Burns and Ace Chatburn. Shaw took the mayor, City Council members and county commissioners to the Boise Little Theater and showed them a slide presentation of how other communities across the country were improving their riverfronts.

By May 1969, the city began acquiring land. The first properties, a parcel owned by W.E. Clements & Sons Concrete Co. -- at the site of the current Wheels 'R' Fun -- and one owned by Boise Paving & Asphalt Co., were targeted for purchase.

The decision resulted in the first condemnation proceedings the city had undertaken for property planned for recreational use, Bowen recalled. "One of the most difficult times we had was when the city condemned those two properties," he said.

What lay ahead however, were some of the most exciting times in park history.