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Historic day for Jordan River: a new steward

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It has been squeezed by suburbia, tainted by trash and tarnished by occasional crime.

Now the long-neglected Jordan River is poised to get more attention — and more money — than ever.

A coalition of government leaders created a Jordan River Commission on Wednesday to guide development and raise funds for the urban waterway snaking through Utah's most populous region.

It is a historic step that could hasten improvements within a corridor that Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon describes as the "crown jewel" of his quickly growing valley of more than a million people.

"This is a momentous day," Utah County Commissioner Gary Anderson said. "We have finally figured out that we are in this together."

The commission now has the backing of all three counties crossed by the Jordan River — Salt Lake, Davis and Utah. It also has the support — so far — of at least three cities: West Valley City, North Salt Lake and Sandy. Commission backers say more agreements will come in the month ahead from municipalities that represent "most" of the 15 cities along the meandering corridor.

The goal is to provide leadership, money and political partnerships to transform the Jordan River into a scenic centerpiece with bicycle trails, boat launches riverside attractions and more.

"It is one thing to have a vision; it is quite another thing to make it happen," said Alan Matheson, executive director of the planning partnership Envision Utah. The commission is "a real breakthrough. There was a recognition that benefits to the river anywhere benefit all of us."

The commission comes after 18 months of sometimes-heated debate about what kind of organization would most effectively steer development and preservation efforts along the urban channel. Governments now have committed both time and money to the plan.

The commission is expected to operate on an annual budget of about \$200,000, according to estimates released earlier this year. That sum would cover equipment, employees and other day-to-day expenses for the organization.

Salt Lake County's share would be \$40,000. Utah and Davis counties would contribute \$10,000 and \$5,000, respectively. Cities also would donate dollars.



People attending the 4th Annual Watershed Symposium at the Utah Cultural Celebration Center in West Valley City were to take a float trip down the Jordan River on Wednesday, August 4, 2010. Thunderstorms in the area prompted organizers to cancel the float, but Troy and Arlene Larsen along with their guide Adriaan Boogaard (not pictured) braved the weather and made the hour long trip. photo: Paul Fraughton/ The Salt Lake Tribune

So what will the commission do?

This governing board — consisting of government officials and community leaders — is expected to review building proposals for large-scale riverside developments, provide guidance to local governments and raise money to restore wetlands, enhance recreation and buy an estimated 3,800 private acres that remain along the river.

“We are on the right path,” Corroon said.

Davis County Commissioner Louenda Downs agreed.

“Our country is based upon ways we connect,” she said. “We started with the Oregon Trail, the Erie Canal and Route 66. This is a way — a very no-brainer kind of way — in Utah to connect ourselves.”

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