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Plan's ripple effect: a better Jordan River

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The Salt Lake Valley soon could have a new steward of its urban river.

A coalition of government leaders and community activists is closer than ever to creating a Jordan River Commission to help transform the worn waterway into a scenic centerpiece with bicycle trails, boat launches and riverside attractions.

Advocates now are floating intergovernmental agreements across the Wasatch Front, calling on 15 cities and three counties along the river to join the commission.

Although this advisory board wouldn't have the power to dictate development along the waterway, the commission would help guide growth and coordinate river improvements from North Salt Lake to Lehi.

On Tuesday, that commission moved forward as the Salt Lake County Council voted unanimously to join.

"I've always thought [the river] was a diamond in the rough that needs to be developed," Councilman Steven DeBry said. "It is kind of like the canyons, everybody is going to use it and benefit from it."

Gabe Epperson, project manager for Envision Utah, hopes to win similar commitments from all riverside communities within two months.

The Jordan River Commission would consist of 30 members -- two-thirds from government and a third from the community -- working to create an expansive nature preserve and outdoor recreational outlet in the heart of Utah's most-populous region.

The panel would review building proposals on large-scale developments near the river. It would coordinate upgrades with up to 18 government entities along the river. And it would raise money to restore wetlands, enhance recreation and buy up the estimated 3,800 acres of private land that remain along the waterway.

All that would come at a cost.

The commission would operate on a \$200,000-plus budget -- covering equipment, overhead and two full-time employees -- a sum paid by members based on their population, land area and frontage along the river.

Cities and counties would cover about half the commission's cost. The other half would come from state agencies and water districts.

Salt Lake County's share would be \$40,000 a year. But fees would vary considerably from community to community, according to estimates released Tuesday. A small city such as Midvale would pay \$1,777 annually, while Salt Lake City would pay \$13,670 a year. The tab would be \$10,000 for Utah County and \$5,000 for Davis County.

It's worth the money, Epperson said. "If we put this commission in place, the future of the Jordan River can be different than we see it today."

Salt Lake County Councilwoman Jenny Wilson, a leading member of the coalition that came up with the river commission, described it as a "good start." But someday she wants to see governments go further and form an independent taxing district to raise money specifically for the river.

The commission comes at the end of a years-long process to bring better leadership to the Jordan River. Advocates want to revitalize a river that, through the years, has had its reputation sullied by floating trash, spray paint and occasional crime.

Success would look something like this: An unobstructed pathway for bicyclists, pedestrians and wildlife watchers stretching from Utah Lake to the Great Salt Lake, a wide swath of open space to keep homes and businesses from nuzzling too close to the water, and periodic "river centers" that would draw people to the waterfront with restaurants, equipment rentals and public amphitheaters.

But, for now, advocates are counting their successes one council meeting -- and one commission membership -- at a time.

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Joining the Jordan club

A coalition of river advocates wants to form a Jordan River Commission to help guide development along the urban waterway. Here is a look at how much annual commission membership might cost cities and counties along the river.

Bluffdale, \$4,280	Salt Lake County, \$40,000
Davis County, \$5,000	Sandy, \$3,800
Draper, \$3,639	Saratoga Springs, \$2,155
Lehi, \$4,863	South Jordan, \$4,077
Midvale, \$1,777	South Salt Lake, \$2,006
Murray, \$3,609	Taylorsville, \$2,974
North Salt Lake, \$1,982	Utah County, \$10,000
Riverton, \$2,641	West Jordan, \$5,148
Salt Lake City, \$13,670	West Valley City, \$5,795

Source: Salt Lake County

Credit: By Jeremiah Stettler The Salt Lake Tribune