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Floating restrooms planned

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer
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Quilomene Bay on a calm day during the fall season.

Essman family photo

The popularity of the Columbia River's Quilomene Bay has reached the point where heavy summertime use is creating a threat to the environment and human health, according to Grant County PUD officials.

On a hot day on a summer weekend there can be between 200 and more than 500 recreational users of the scenic bay 13 miles north of Vantage on the Kittitas County side of the river.

There are no restrooms or other visitor amenities at the location that's under the jurisdiction of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

This turns some sites around the little bay into a human litter box in the summer, said Kittitas County Undersheriff Clay Myers.

"On a given weekend — Friday, Saturday and Sunday — there can be easily 1,000 people or more visiting that area by boat," said Myers who oversees the department's marine patrol unit. "There's a beautiful beach, it's secluded and there can be boats two or three deep parked around the lagoon on those weekends."

To lessen the growing problem of no restrooms at the site, the Grant County Public Utility District is proposing to install a floating restroom facility, anchored in the bay, which some call a cove.

Grant County PUD Parks and Recreation Supervisor Jerri Mickle said extremely heavy use of the bay is occurring in the warm months, May through September.

"We (county PUD) monitor use at the site and things like impacts to plants and erosion to the dune there," Mickle said recently. "We also track things like environmental and any habitat damage and do litter clean up, including what's deposited there because there's no restrooms."

The bay is on the pool of river water built up behind Wanapum Dam, owned and operated by the county PUD. Under the requirements of the PUD's federal license to operate the hydroelectric dam, the PUD is mandated to provide recreational access to the pool and riverside improvements for visitors.

The bay is on Quilomene Wildlife Area lands, managed by the state wildlife agency.

The bay and the immediate shrub-steppe lands around it are considered a dispersed camping area where visitors are required to clean up and pack out any trash they generate there by camping.

Mickle said the PUD has applied to a state parks and recreation program for funds to pay for up to 75 percent of the cost for floating restrooms.

She said the cost of the facility could range from \$75,000 to \$100,000, and include a system to take restroom and other waste water from boats with built-in amenities and from those using small, portable toilets on their boats.

In addition, the PUD wants to buy a 20-foot pumper boat for about \$80,000 that will pump waste from the floating restroom and boat pump-out tanks.

The PUD will know sometime later this year if it has received the grant; if other funds are obtained, the system might be in place in the bay in May 2016 before the boating season starts.

The floating restrooms will be anchored at a site that's deep enough for most small craft to tie up alongside for visitors to use.

"Everyone we've informed about this project is pretty excited about it; it's something that's been needed for a long time," Mickle said. "It helps the environment and makes for a more comfortable boating experience."

Loved to death

Undersheriff Myers said he welcomes the project that would protect the health and safety of recreational users of the beach area and the environment.

He said boaters in summer land at the bay after pushing off from Crescent Bar, Vantage, the Sunland riverside development and from beaches on the east shore adjacent to the Gorge Amphitheater land. Some are shuttled by boat to the beach area by friends or relatives, stay the day, and are picked up later in the afternoon or evening.

"It's probably got the highest recreational use per square foot on the Kittitas County stretch of the river than any other site," Myers said. "In those warm, summer months, and into the early fall, even into October, it also has all the problems that can accompany high levels of recreational use."

The Sheriff's Office marine patrol has dealt with assaults, disorderly conduct, operating power boats under the influence of alcohol, sexual assaults, illegal drug activities, public intoxication and more.

He acknowledged that the majority of Quilomene Bay users use it responsibly, but the few who are irresponsible can hurt the experience for everyone else.

"I don't see its popularity going down anytime soon; it will only go up," said Myers, who added that the Grant County Sheriff's Office also patrols the site by boat in a cooperative effort.

By land

Longtime Kittitas County outdoor and wildlife enthusiasts Bill and Deborah Essman said they take the long way to Quilomene Bay in the spring, fall and winter, and visit there up to 15 times a year.

They use their four-wheel drive vehicle on rough, primitive roads from their rural home on Brick Mill Road to the bay, only about 23 miles away.

"But it takes us about three hours to get there," said Deborah earlier this week. "We take it pretty easy on those hard roads and enjoy the land all around us as we drive."

The couple usually drive using the Parke Creek corridor to the bay that has eight or more creeks emptying into it.

Deborah said she never tires of the scenic bay's diversity of birds and waterfowl in the quiet of early spring and in fall and winter; they stay away in the summer because of the huge crowds.

"It has a unique quality, a very peaceful setting (in fall and winter)," Deborah Essman said. "There's a solitude there, and the wildflowers in spring are so beautiful."

Essman, president of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, said efforts to keep the site clean and safe are welcomed by her and the club.

Mike Johnston