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TOP STORY

Design almost done for Helen McCabe Interpretive center, work to start next year

By NICOLE KLAUSS staff writer
Nov 14, 2014



About 50 volunteers worked to plant trees at Helen McCabe Park for the Grow the Grove event. Volunteers included local Boy Scouts, Forterra NW staff, Kittitas Environmental Education Network members, KEEN volunteer Barbara Brim who operated the bobcat augur and Deb Essman, KEEN board member and Kittitas County Field and Stream Club president.

(Contributed)

Construction of an interpretive center at the Helen McCabe State Park southeast of Ellensburg is set to start in the spring if the project continues to go as planned.

The Yakima River Canyon Interpretive Center is a project headed up by the Kittitas Environmental Education Network (KEEN).

The 64-acre Helen McCabe State Park has been managed by Washington State Parks since the 1970s, Kittitas Environmental Education Network chairwoman Jill Scheffer said.

"When they did their park planner, their 100-year park vision years ago, this park was not on their list of parks that would be developed mostly because it's small, and it doesn't meet their needs as a state park," Scheffer said. "They weren't going to invest in it."

Scheffer, who works for Forterra and founded KEEN, said KEEN took interest in the area and came up with the idea to build an interpretive center at the park. KEEN obtained permission from state parks and began looking for funding. The project received \$800,000 from the Federal Highway Administration and \$200,000 in matching funds from Kittitas County.

"We're 95 percent done with the design," Scheffer said. "We're looking at construction starting in the early new year."

County commissioners are working to transfer ownership of 16 acres of park land from state parks to the county for the center. The change is expected to be approved at a session on Nov. 20.

Partnering with the county

KEEN has partnered with the Kittitas County government for work designing and building the interpretive center. The county has been supportive of the project since the funding was obtained.

Commissioner Paul Jewell said it wasn't hard to get behind the project because it has a strong grassroots organization of local people supporting it and because it's an opportunity for economic development in the county.

"The Yakima Canyon is an amazing resource that contributes significantly to our way of life in Kittitas County," he said on Thursday. "There's a few landscapes that speak to us as a community — the Teanaway would be another. They really epitomize why we love the lifestyle we do in the county."

The Yakima Canyon attracts many visitors as people come to the area to recreate. The goal is to have the interpretive center bring in additional tourism.

"It makes sense with all the activity," Jewell said. "An interpretive center that can add to the cultural experience can add to the county's tourism industry."

The interpretive center hasn't faced opposition, though people have questioned whether it will be successful and what kind of building it should be. Jewell said the challenges will come further down the road when the center is operating to figure out how to fund the operations.

"At this point we've got funding for the interpretive center," he said. "It's going to be a beautiful amenity right at the opening of the Yakima Canyon, which is such an important landscape."

Earlier this year, KEEN was investigating whether the facility can bring in revenue because federal money is being used. Scheffer said that issue has been worked out.

"We're building a business plan that will allow us to create revenue that will support the maintenance," she said.

Phase one of the process is to build the main building with a large exhibit area and some display space for educational items.

"It's sort of the welcome area for the facility, which we consider to be the entire park because we're incorporating outdoor education with things happening inside," Scheffer said.

Restoration work

KEEN volunteers have dedicated hundreds of hours and grant funds toward restoration projects at the park including trail building, planting and weed management over the last 10 years.

While waiting on the construction to begin, KEEN has continued its restoration work to the park.

KEEN with a volunteer group of approximately 50 people, including On Target 4-H Club members, KEEN board member and Kittitas County Field and Stream Club President Deb Essman, KEEN volunteer Barbara Brim, Boy Scouts, and Forterra NW staff recently planted trees at the Helen McCabe Park last weekend. KEEN raised money to plant 300 trees to restore habitat at the park.

On the road: Canyon plan to be submitted

The Helen McCabe interpretive center project ties in directly with the Yakima River Canyon Scenic Byway, a route that follows the curves of the Yakima River.

In 1967, the state Legislature authorized a bill for the development of scenic and recreational highways in the state, and Yakima was named the first scenic corridor.

The goal of Yakima Canyon Project is to tell the Yakima River Canyon Scenic Byway's story, protect the natural qualities of the corridor and broaden travelers experiences. The interpretive center will help do so.

Kittitas Environmental Education Network chairwoman Jill Scheffer has brought together nearly 30 partners who are interested in the canyon to work on improvements.

“We meet regularly,” Scheffer said. “We’ve redone the corridor management program.”

The first Corridor Management Plan for the canyon was developed in 1968, and had not been regularly updated. The new plan, available online at kittitasee.net, will soon be submitted for final approval from the Department of Transportation.

The new plan lists ways to improve recreation activities like fishing, biking, hiking and scenic driving in the canyon.

Once approval is obtained, the first project will be to work on a safe cycling path through the canyon from Ellensburg to Yakima, Scheffer said.