

# Rethinking the river: A vision for the Willamette and its open spaces is forming

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State biologist Jeff Ziller navigates his drift boat past EWEB property on the Willamette River in downtown Eugene. Ideas from an upcoming public workshop will help create an “open space” vision for the area and shape development of the riverfront property.

It's a weekday morning and the widest thoroughfare in Eugene-Springfield is almost devoid of people.

Only biologist Jeff Ziller, conservationist Joe Moll and a couple of journalists have ventured out, but this isn't your ordinary thruway — Interstate 5, say. It's the city's original transportation link: the Willamette River.

Ziller, who works for the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife and serves on the McKenzie Watershed Council, and Moll, executive director of the conservation group McKenzie River Trust, share tour guide duties on a four-hour trip. It begins at the Clearwater Boat Ramp southeast of Springfield on the Middle Fork of the Willamette and ends just north of the confluence with the McKenzie.

For a river that runs through the heart of the state's second-largest metropolitan area, this 16-mile run has a surprisingly wild feel. Cityscape mingles with riparian habitat: graceful sweeping willow, tall cottonwood, ubiquitous blackberries, alder and oak line the banks. Buildings and bridges come into view only to give way again to greenery. Some banks are stabilized by big boulders. In other places, the river is free to flow as it will.

Ziller and Moll have agreed to give us this duck's-eye view of the river to encourage public participation in a workshop that focuses on the future of open spaces along the Willamette.

It's one of two unique opportunities community members have to weigh in on the river. The Willamette River Workshop, sponsored by a host of local agencies, governments and nonprofit organizations, invites community members to help these groups set priorities.

Eugene residents also will have a chance to shape riverfront development in coming months as the Eugene Water & Electric Board begins planning how several acres of its waterfront property might best be used.

For now, though, it's a cloudy Tuesday morning on the blue-green river. With Ziller at the oars, the drift boat moves along at a steady clip, gliding past parks strung like green jewels along the river. The better-known parks, such as the county's largest, Howard Buford Recreation Area, and

Eugene's Alton Baker Park, alternate with smaller gems such as the Dorris Ranch Living History Farm and East Bank Park.

"This is the area we call 'the town run,'" Ziller says. "It's just a great place to fly fish for steelhead."

Trails and paths — both official and unofficial — skirt the banks, popular with walkers and cyclists.

Eagles and osprey ride the air above the water, while vultures hunch in branches along the banks. Great blue herons stand in the shady shallows. Mergansers stop on gravel bars, while spring's first strings of mallard chicks follow their mothers in slower moving water.

There are homes along the river — from the tony and large to the tiny and mobile. In several places blue tarps and tents reveal the most modest dwellings of all — the homeless camps of transients.

Industry makes itself apparent, too. Just before Island Park in Springfield, the large holding tanks of a chemical plant are visible. Occasional "No trespassing" signs mark the location of gravel mining operations, otherwise mostly hidden from view.

The drift boat slides under bridges ferrying cars and pedestrians from one bank to the other. Aside from bridges, the most prominent structure along on the river may be EWEB's headquarters, with its round fountain plaza snugged up against the bank.

Inviting public discourse in Eugene can be a two-edged sword, Moll and Ziller acknowledge. There will be people who want a river flowing free without constraints, sitting down with those who own property along it and who bear the brunt of impacts when the river shifts its flow. But public involvement wards off a worse problem, Moll said.

"When you're dealing with public resources, the biggest danger is apathy," he said.

The "open spaces" concept isn't just about the parks, trails and other recreation facilities along the river, said Jeff Krueger, a landscape architect with Lane Council of Governments, which is organizing Tuesday's workshop. It also involves private land owners, whose practices can have significant impacts.

The planning effort is much like the Rivers to Ridges project LCOG organized in 2003, Krueger said. That was a coordinated effort by local planners to map out potential parks, trail systems and habitat restoration projects from Fern Ridge to the Coburg Hills and from Creswell to Junction City.

Such plans may feel a little squishy because they have no regulatory teeth. They don't require that anyone do anything, Krueger acknowledged.

But they can result in real change when endorsed by city and county governments, by park districts and nonprofit groups, because they demonstrate a shared vision that can attract grant money both from the government and from private foundations, Krueger said.

Rivers to Ridges, for example, was specifically endorsed by Lane County, Eugene, Springfield and Willamalane Park and Recreation District.

McKenzie River Trust, for example, was able to point to the Rivers to Ridges vision in getting funding for its Green Island restoration project near the confluence with the McKenzie, Moll said.

And the Willamalane Park and Recreation District used Rivers to Ridges in a successful application for federal transportation funds for a trail along the Middle Fork linking Clearwater Boat Ramp with Dorris Ranch, Willamalane spokesman Mike Moscovitz said.

Public comment on the Rivers to Ridges effort helped planners recognize the need for more access points along the Ridgeline trail, Krueger said.

The list of sponsors for the Willamette planning effort includes the McKenzie Watershed Council, The Nature Conservancy, the cities of Eugene and Springfield, Lane County Parks, EWEB, Willamette Riverkeeper, the McKenzie River Trust and the Metropolitan Wastewater Management Commission.

Some of the benefits that could result include stronger connections among the river's parks, improvements to Eugene's canoe canal and Springfield's millrace, enhanced side channels for the river's native species, and extended trails out to rural areas, Krueger said.

For those who are also interested in the development side, EWEB's riverfront master plan advisory team will be meeting through the summer in planning sessions open to the public. Design work on the project, which also will include public sessions, begins in the fall.

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## WILLAMETTE PLANNING

Two projects will help shape open spaces and development on the river

Tuesday: 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., EWEB, 500 E. Fourth Ave., training room. More information: [www.lcog.org/willamette](http://www.lcog.org/willamette). Can't make the meeting? Make your thoughts known in this online survey: [willamettevision.wordpress.com/2009/06/05/willamette-river-open-space-survey/](http://willamettevision.wordpress.com/2009/06/05/willamette-river-open-space-survey/)

June 24: 5:30 p.m., EWEB, 500 E. Fourth Ave., board room. EWEB Riverfront Master Plan Community Advisory Team meeting.