

Portneuf River Visioning Plan Stakeholder Assessment

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Pocatello, ID

(Conducted by Seth Cohen and Andrea Carson,
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USACE)

As part of the Planning Assistance to States (Water Resources Development Act of 1974, Section 22, as amended) cost share program between Walla Walla District and the City of Pocatello to develop a community “visioning” document that will serve as a conceptual master plan for environmental improvements to the Portneuf River, the Conflict Resolution and Public Participation Center of Expertise (CPCX), a part of the Walla Walla District PDT, was charged with assessing community interests and developing a plan for the project’s stakeholder engagement process.

To initiate development of the engagement plan, in August of 2015, CPCX conducted a stakeholder assessment through facilitated dialogues with organizations and individuals active in Portneuf River improvement activities or that have an interest in the river. The purpose of the assessment was to: (1) to build a more complete foundation of information about community members’ awareness of existing Portneuf River conditions and their interests in improving future conditions, (2) to help USACE design the most effective set of workshops to develop the Portneuf River vision plan, (3) to identify information gaps that will help inform the study, and (4) to identify engagement strategies for other key citizens to ensure creation of a vision plan representative of all members of the community, including socially vulnerable populations¹ that might be less likely to participate in workshops and meetings.

Interviews focused primarily on stakeholders representing the following groups:

- Portneuf Valley Pride
- Pocatello/Chubbuck School District
- Pocatello Community Charter School
- Portneuf Greenway Foundation
- Bannock Transportation Planning Organization
- Portneuf Health Trust
- NeighborWorks Pocatello
- Old Town Pocatello
- Portneuf Watershed Partnership
- City of Pocatello Staff & Mayor
- City Council
- Idaho Bureau of Homeland Security
- Idaho State University (ISU)
- Landowners along the river

The information collected during the stakeholder assessment will be used in two ways. First, the information gleaned from the stakeholder assessment will be used to guide the USACE PDT, the City of Pocatello, and the CPCX team’s development of a series of focused stakeholder

visioning workshops and will assure that “right-sized” public meetings are conducted to share workshop products and receive effective feedback. Second, the information collected during the assessment is to be incorporated into an initial draft of a master plan for the Portneuf River corridor, which will be presented and refined during the stakeholder visioning workshops. The outcome of this interactive process will be a community vision plan that reflects the community’s values and desired future and diagrams opportunities for change.

The following sections provide a thematic overview of predominant narratives and specific examples of stakeholder interests and concerns.

Findings

Discussions with stakeholders focused on their interests and concerns about the Portneuf River from both organizational and individual perspectives. Thematic analysis is one way to understand some of the core interests and values of stakeholders. Many of the narrative themes presented below intersect with one another. It is therefore important to look for the interconnectivity of stakeholders' values, interests and concerns. For example, as people talk about the poor appearance of the Portneuf they may also talk about the need for water quality and increased quantity (flow).

Perceptions of the River (Aesthetics):

Many stakeholders currently view the Portneuf River as a “negative” asset to the city due to its physical appearance, which includes the color and quality of the water, low flows, and most predominantly the concrete channel which prevents access and looks unapproachable and uninviting. As a result, people do not feel connected with the river or “even think of it as a river,” but rather see it as an eye sore and a wasted resource. At the same time, however, stakeholders generally see great potential for the improvement of river reaches that would make the Portneuf attractive and desirable for use. It is believed that improving the aesthetics of the river corridor, and the water quality (described below), will lead to an overall benefit for the look and feel of the city of Pocatello.

Specific suggestions from interviews of proposed solutions include:

- Modifying both sides of the river wherever possible to attract people that live nearby – and connect them (implying that the river is currently a divider).
- Looking to the river in the community of Lava as an example of appearance and usage opportunities for the Portneuf River in Pocatello (it was suggested that project leaders look at what has happened to the river over the years between Lava and Pocatello).
- Restore the lost oxbows and meanders in the study area.

Water Quality:

Stakeholder often spoke about the poor water quality. Observation-based concerns noted the River's distasteful color and the observed flow of stormwater and other pollutants running into the channel. Scientists from ISU and the State DEQ discussed how low flow and warm temperatures prevent fish and other life from surviving in the channel. Pollution associated with agricultural byproduct and siltation, attributed to the confluence with Marsh Creek 7 miles (as the crow flies) upstream of the study area, is another concern. A DEQ representative noted, "Water quantity begets water quality." The general sentiment was that people will not engage with the river if it's not cleaned up and perceived to be safe from pollutants and debris.

Specific suggestions from interviews of proposed solutions include:

- Educating community members on the water quality of the river. If the river is perceived or known to be healthy then people will want to spend time there.
- Reestablishing water movement and flow to a more natural system will restore the river. Reducing silt and improving flow is critical to making the system look "river-like" and appear natural.
- Purchasing water rights to increase flow (City is already considering this option).

Access and Recreation:

Increased access to the River for recreation and "connectivity" of trails along the River are key interests for many stakeholders. The idea of a "greenway" bordering the concrete channel was a central topic, yet it remains a concern for many homeowners whose private property, and privacy, would be impacted by any significant alteration of the channel and trail usage. Viewpoints vary on how a greenway might be constructed and how continuous trails and access might be developed throughout the city. There is acceptance by many that complete access won't be possible. Although eminent domain is no longer an option for greenway development due to changes in state laws, it should be noted that prior attempts to acquire property through the use of eminent domain for the creation of trails along the river left some bitter feelings that must be carefully considered with any future projects.

Given that some homeowners are likely to resist any changes to their property along the channel and levees, stakeholders proposed short-term and long-term solutions about how access to the river and a continuous recreational trail might still occur:

- The greenway may not always be directly on the river or might not be fully connected, but there could be ways to create pathways or bridges connecting sections.
- Consider creative designs for a greenway in the channel, such as covering the channel in parts or placing a "hanging" path over the river to avoid property infringement.
- Need to create mechanism to not only pay for the creation of the greenway but the maintenance as well. Otherwise, property owners are concerned that they will be the ones to bear the burden of keeping it clean and safe because city doesn't have resources.

In terms of access to the River for the purposes of recreation, school representatives articulated interest in their students using the River as part of their curriculum. ISU Students and other community members also indicated a desire to use the River for swimming, kayaking, and float trips.

Suggestions to improve river access for recreational uses include:

- Additional efforts to clean out the trees and other debris in the River.
- Increased flow to support floating and fishing.
- Access points along the channel to allow community members to climb in and out of the channel.

Channel and Modifications:

As expected, much of the discussion centered on the concrete flood protection channel. While stakeholders still want to maintain appropriate level of flood risk protection (see section below), many would prefer to remove or significantly modify as many sections of the channel as is feasible while maintaining an appropriate level of protection. The channel is seen as an impediment to good water quality, recreation, and access. It was also deemed as dangerous by some. Emergency Officials noted that its current design makes human and animal rescue challenging.

It is generally recognized that barriers to modify the channel exist from both an economic and property acquisition standpoint. Some of the proposed stakeholder suggestions include:

- Consider the removal or modification of the concrete bottom and walls if found to have significant impact on water temperature, habitat quality, etc.
- Open up the channel on existing public lands, such as parks, for increased river access (could be low-hanging fruit).
- Improving access and usage of the channel can have economic benefits to Old Town area and provide incentives for new businesses to locate along river or nearby.
- General concerns:
 - Increasing access to the channel may increase the likelihood of vandalism/graffiti.
 - Increasing access to the river may introduce other safety hazards.
 - Development (gentrification) means that the Old Town neighborhoods may no longer be affordable or welcoming to the current Old Town neighborhood residents.

Acquisitions along Channel:

As noted earlier, the Greenway Foundation's threat to use "Eminent Domain" caused major conflict in 2009/10. They have new leadership now and are taking a more sensitive approach to development proposals despite their desire for continuous recreational access along all reaches of the river. The possibility of revitalizing the areas of town with low-quality housing stock is seen as a boon to many members of the community. However, acquiring property will be difficult because the city cannot condemn houses for transportation uses and some homeowners along the River are reportedly opposed to the idea of leaving their property. However, some properties may be available for purchase because certain homeowners along the River are open to compensation for their property and/or some properties may be vacant. It should also be noted that a significant amount of property along the concrete channel is investment property being rented out.

Recognizing the barriers and need for compromises, it was suggested by some that this will need to be a long-term effort to “slowly buy out homes over the next 50 years” or that not every house needs to be moved. Landlords need to also be engaged and invited to be an active stakeholder in this process. NeighborWorks Pocatello and others in Old Town might have the best suggestions on involving landlords and homeowners in the visioning plan, so that the plan is realistic regarding property acquisition.

Flooding:

Flood risk is still a concern for people that experienced or heard about the floods in the early 60’s. Therefore, if any changes to the channel are made, it is imperative that the community members are reassured of their protection against floods. If the visioning process doesn’t address this concern and reassure them then they may “tune out” in the public involvement aspect of the study. Conversely, many stakeholders expressed concern that the science used to determine flood risk when the channel was built does not reflect current risk. They fear that USACE standards will limit adequate change to the channel.

Points for consideration during the visioning process are reflected below:

- This study needs to consider reassessing whether the 6000 cfs channel standard is an appropriate benchmark or an explanation needs to be provided to stakeholders explaining why this number cannot be changed.
- Create ways to avoid the freezing of ice and the damming of water in the river. This is an issue for flooding. The channel was built to mitigate winter rain on snow flood events. Ice booms were later installed in the channel to deal with subsequent ice buildup which was causing flooding without the rain on snow events.
- Flood- educational awareness is needed. Provide explanations for: 1) What are the current drivers of flooding? and 2) how does the channel contribute to flood risk reduction versus a modified channel? Need to bring stormwater flooding into this educational piece too.
- Solid flood-risk information was presented by Ken Fagnant from an EMS perspective.

Implementation of Plan/Taking Action:

Stakeholders often stated that this visioning process will only be considered successful and worthwhile if it leads to action and tangible results. Recognizing that change may take time, they would like to create a realistic plan that identifies opportunities for both short-term and long-term changes. They need some small wins along the way and hope the city and partners will make that a reality with economic investments to complete projects. Some noted that addressing Aesthetics & Functionality are the lower hanging fruit, “Design something that is appealing at a low flow but can handle a larger flow.”

Some stakeholder questions that may need to be addressed during the visioning process include:

- What room for creativity exists when thinking about changes to the channel or other sections?

- How will the visioning document be used? If funding comes along, will the plan be used to implement the community's priorities? What are the associated costs for proposed projects?
- What kind of working relationship will we stakeholders have with the Corps?
 - Will the Corps support or block what the Pocatello community members want?
 - How does Congress work into this process?
- What is the funding potential from the City and the Corps for implementing this plan? Where is the commitment and potential for really making change?
 - Foundations and local business may be willing to pitch in to specific efforts

The Visioning Process:

When asked how the visioning plan process might best meet their needs and what suggestions stakeholders might have to make it successful and useful, some suggested that the process be guided, or driven, by Pocatello community members rather than the Corps. Additionally, everyone acknowledged that this process will only be successful if it includes, addresses, and considers the desires of both those who support and oppose proposed changes to the River. When seeking stakeholder engagement for working groups and public meetings it is key to articulate the value to the community from this cost-sharing effort – people will want to feel that city and federal money is being spent wisely.

Specific suggestions to strengthen the visioning process include:

- Build awareness of what the river could be by showing examples of other successful modification projects.
- Develop an Online Presence and options for online engagement (an alternative to workshop charettes)
 - People that come to workshops and public meetings may be the same folks that are typically engaged rather than a diverse, representative community group.
 - DOTs are using interactive communication, gamified processes (incentives, credit, reward)
 - Learn from ISU work
- Standard public meetings don't work well anymore – reach people where they are in smaller locations with smaller meetings
 - Special attention to neighborhood groups
 - Hold gatherings at a-typical meeting places (churches, etc)

Education/Outreach:

Many people in Pocatello do not trust government and may value independence, privacy, and private property rights over any interest or desire to contribute to the larger community improvement effort. Therefore, interviews also focused on how to produce effective outreach and education efforts that will lead to inclusive and active involvement in the visioning process:

- Consider the type of language different stakeholders will gravitate to and respond to when approached about the study Different narratives about the study, the visioning

process, and the river itself will have different impacts on the diverse stakeholders that live in the area (see interview with Donna Lybecker below).

Some suggestions for the outreach and education efforts' CONTENT include:

- Address flooding concerns - Honor the history of the floods in Pocatello. Allow community members to share their past experiences with flooding.
- Provide examples to show how the river can be an economic and quality of life asset. These examples should especially resonate with younger generations. Show the potential.
- Educate people about real existing conditions. Start with true, and accurate information to dispel anything the community members do not know. (i.e. current status of water quality; difference between stormwater and river water flooding; existing flow levels)
 - Visualization and interactivity will be key. Let people see and connect with pictures, maps, and graphics.
- Inform community members on the possibilities and limitations of this project.
 - What is feasible given technical, financial, and time limitations?
 - Set realistic expectations: What is this visioning project's expected outcome?

Building Trust/Damage Control:

Relationships between stakeholders, the City, and the Corps may need to be sensitively approached due to previous breaches of trust. Several stakeholders, including the City, brought up a lasting disappointment about the Corps' insistence on the removal of trees and other vegetation that occurred along the levees. The abrupt removal resulted in decreased privacy to homes and lack of shade for recreational trails and homes. It also has possible impact on the health of the river ecosystem. Fortunately, this current stakeholder engagement effort seemed to help create a different view of the Corps for some. People noted, including City Council members, that they appreciated this process of engagement/design.

Some actions might help build greater trust and faith in the process:

- Educate people about the levee clean-up, the role of the Corps and the City. Perhaps apologize for the way this occurred. People are still upset about this and did not find the Corps approach "collaborative." They noted that the way they were just "told" that this is the way it is, by the USACE representative, was not well received.
- Use a collaborative decision-making approach in this study

Public/Stakeholder Participation:

Lastly, stakeholders were asked who else should participate to make this an appropriately inclusive visioning process. Suggestions follow here and can be found under specific interview notes below. The Stakeholder Engagement Team will help create the path forward with the city and Corps PDT.

- Agricultural interest- surveys are city focused - didn't capture the agriculture sector
- Landlord community- organized and powerful, own a lot of the properties along the River
- Senior citizens- those who were here when town flooded - get their buy in before surface with campaign." "We need them to not put up united front about flood control."

- Engage what one landowner referred to as “Tangible Resource Stakeholders - property owners along river as opposed to Interest/Vision Stakeholders- those who may live here, and have a vision but are not directly affected by the changes to the channel/river. Both are important.”

All of the above interests and concerns distilled from the stakeholders interviews can help to inform the creation of the workshop content and the material within the first draft of the Visioning Document. Points above should also guide the selection of working group members and the ongoing outreach and education efforts that will accompany the visioning process.