

# River Springs owners to seek park designer

Planning for Wilson boat-ramp property to get underway soon, nonprofit says.

By Kevin Huelsmann

The new owners of dozens of acres along the Snake River intend to reach out to local design firms next week to plan for a long-awaited park.

Though it is a seemingly small step, the announcement marks the first move toward developing the highly anticipated park along the banks of the Snake River. The park would be located near the intersection of highways 22 and 390 on property often referred to as River Springs.

The announcement also brings the nonprofit group one step closer to soliciting input for the park. Board members said the park has been on the minds of a lot of valley residents who already have started to reach out.

"We're moving forward, but there are a lot of things on the property we have to address," Jackson Hole Land Trust board member Scott Pierson said Tuesday.

Pierson is one of three board members who make up the Rendezvous Lands Conservancy, a nonprofit entity that was created

last month when the Jackson Hole Land Trust and LOR Foundation jointly purchased 40 acres on the west bank of the Snake River.

LOR Foundation Executive Director Hal Hutchinson and land trust Executive Director Laurie Andrews are the other two board members.

Since closing the land deal with a group of private investors, members of the lands conservancy have been trying to shift gears, switching from months of intense negotiations. Now they are trying to kickstart planning efforts for a park that likely will include input from numerous community groups and governmental agencies.

"When we get our feet underneath us, we'll start to go out and get public input," Hutchinson said.

By the end of next week, the three board members of the Rendezvous Lands Conservancy plan to reach out to design firms in the valley. Though they have not yet released details about the planning process, board members said they want to "pursue a local, community-oriented design process."

Board members said they hope to have a firm in place by the beginning of March.

Whoever is hired to lead the design process is expected to solicit input from valley residents for the project, which

so far has been described only as a "natural park" that will host a wide variety of public uses.

In planning the park, board members said they will try to balance public access with the preservation of the property.

"We're cognizant of the challenge that this potentially could be loved to death," Hutchinson said.

As part of its contribution to the land purchase, the LOR Foundation pitched in some money that is expected to help pay for the initial planning work. Hutchinson declined to say how much the foundation contributed.

Lands conservancy board members also are expected to work on plans for the site with river users and town and county officials. River users are hoping to launch a tax-supported project to upgrade the Wilson boat launch, while town and county officials are considering whether to build a pathway bridge that would land on the River Springs property.

Board members said they support both projects.

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— Hal Hutchinson

LOR FOUNDATION EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
RENDEZVOUS LANDS CONSERVANCY  
BOARD MEMBER

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Hutchinson said the group is "encouraging" the town and county to build the pathway bridge on the north side of Highway 22 so that it brings cyclists and pedestrians through the proposed park. Elected officials have not yet made a decision about where exactly to

build the new path.

Board members have also not yet put in place the conservation easement that they expect will eventually protect the site. Group members said they want to wait to record the easement until plans for the park begin to coalesce so they do not rule out any potential uses prematurely.

"We're waiting to see what the plan is before we put a box around it," Pierson said.

Details of what might be included in the park also will determine how much fundraising the group has to do. Board members said they currently are focused on raising money to pay back the \$3 million loan from The Conservation Fund they used to finance a portion of their land purchase.

The board also is trying to coordinate its efforts with staff at Evans Construction, which is responsible for cleaning up the gravel operation that is winding down on the property. Though board members said plans for the park will be developed separately, they also said they want to make sure the two entities' work is complementary.

Evans holds a lease on the property for a gravel operation until August. The company then has until Nov. 15, 2013, to complete reclamation work at the site, county planning staff said.