

## **Update: Proponents say Columbus' \$23 million Chattahoochee River whitewater project's ready to launch, could be finished by 2012**

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In an announcement full of wind and waves of applause, proponents Monday proclaimed Columbus will have a 2.5-mile downtown river whitewater course by 2012.

The project's price tag is estimated at \$23 million, its economic impact at \$42 million.

The announcement by local government and business leaders came during a program on the 14th Street Bridge, where gusting winds nearly unveiled the project logo "Ready2raft" before presenters were prepared to show it off.

Proponents of the whitewater plan expect the work can be finished over two summers, while the Chattahoochee River's running low. John Turner of the W.C. Bradley Co. said the project should begin not this May but next.

The plan is to divert the river's flow and deploy heavy equipment to the rocky bed to take apart the Eagle & Phenix dam below 13th Street and the City Mills dam near 18th Street. Then workers would construct an engineered whitewater course that fits the river's more natural flow.

Citing figures from a Columbus State University study, Uptown Columbus President Richard Bishop said the finished course is expected to create 700 jobs, draw 18,000 visitors — 144,000 of those from out of town — and annually bring in \$300,000 in lodging taxes and \$1.7 million in sales taxes.

"This is serious economic development," Bishop said.

John Anderson, a kayaker and design consultant, said breaching the Eagle & Phenix dam has the potential to create "a set of monster waves," and when the Chattahoochee's up to a full flow of 13,000 cubic feet per second, it will be "a world-class whitewater run."

The challenge will be designing a course that works when the river's low, down to the minimum 800 cubic feet per second. That drop in flow could strand fish in pools, and when the river comes back up, it could strand bystanders on islands in the stream.

Government and business leaders have been discussing whitewater for more than a decade. It has been studied by engineering and marketing consultants. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers put its stamp of approval on the project in the early stages.

More recently engineers have been dividing the project into more manageable phases with a range of cost estimates. Public and private money has been used to acquire both of the dams and put them under the control of Uptown Columbus, a nonprofit managing and promoting downtown commerce.

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Based on murky data, early estimates of what the whitewater project would cost were thought to be low — \$12 million to \$16 million.

Ed Kinner, a volunteer engineer, said the work requires more than merely breaching dams. Upstream from each dam are the ruins of dams built earlier, he said. The first City Mills dam was built in 1828 and the first Eagle & Phenix Mill dam in 1847. For whitewater, the breach in the current City Mills dam would be 350 feet. From the Eagle & Phenix, 450 feet would be removed. The remaining wings would be capped to impede erosion.

The whitewater course would begin south of the North Highlands dam, around 35th Street, and end south of the Eagle & Phenix dam, near 11th Street. The overall drop in elevation along the 2.5 miles is about 40 feet, Kinner said. The rapids below the Eagle & Phenix dam would have to be softened to ease a 15-foot drop in riverbed elevation over 370 feet, from one side of the dam to the other, Kinner said. The Chattahoochee's range of water flow here runs from about 800-13,300 cubic feet per second. If the dams are breached, the water level will fluctuate 5-7 feet, he said.

The Army Corps of Engineers has helped fund the whitewater plan as the "Chattahoochee Fall Line Ecosystem Restoration Project."

Tennessee's remote Ocoee River whitewater course attracts more than 200,000 people in a season that runs from March through October and offers up to 10 miles of rafting. Columbus' 2.5-mile course could offer whitewater every day of the year, with lodging and restaurants close by and a Riverwalk and bridges for viewing the course. Other cities, including Denver and Charlotte, N.C., have urban whitewater attractions.