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Mayor: 'Mind-boggling' number of paddle sports, boating events could come to Oklahoma City

Wednesday, November 11, 2009
By Carol Cole-Frowe

The \$60 million MAPS 3 proposal for improvements to the Oklahoma River, the seven-mile stretch of the North Canadian River going through central Oklahoma City, would give the city a world-class venue unlike that in any other locale, say city leaders.



LOCATION UNSPECIFIED
'IT WILL CHANGE THIS CITY'
FOR THE HEALTH OF IT
VIDEO

"It would become the world's premier facility for rowing, canoeing and kayaking events," said Mayor Mick Cornett. "This is an opportunity for Oklahoma City to be world-class and world-renowned." OKC residents will vote Dec. 8 on the \$777 million MAPS 3. Of the Oklahoma River component of MAPS 3, \$35 million would be spent on river improvements, including a larger grandstand, new sound system, a scoreboard, a floating stage, river beautification and permanent sports-venue lighting. The rest of the \$60 million would be spent to construct a whitewater rapids course for kayaks, one of only a handful in the U.S. Cornett said the number of paddle sports and boating events that could come to Oklahoma City if MAPS 3 passes is "mind boggling."
LOCATION UNSPECIFIED

The mayor said he knows it's hard to visualize how the public, recirculating whitewater rapids course would work. That's why MAPS 3 proponents have posted a five-minute YouTube video of a similar 307-acre course in Charlotte, N.C., at the U.S. National Whitewater Center on the banks of the Catawba River. A link can be viewed at www.okgazette.com.

"It's a pretty incredible facility," Cornett said. Where will this public whitewater kayaking facility be located? "There is no exact location," said David Holt, the mayor's chief of staff. "Conventional wisdom has been that it would be near (or) in the Boathouse District. The most likely area would be the north shore where all the privately funded boathouses are, but obviously the land is not acquired at this time. "(It's) important to note that the whitewater course would not be biologically connected with the river, but the idea is that it would be very close to the rowing facilities and course."

The river's condition came under scrutiny when close to four dozen of 367 competitors in the Boathouse International Triathlon became ill after swimming a 1.5-kilometer portion of the contest in the Oklahoma River on May 16-17.

Mike Knopp, executive director of the Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation, said every Olympic water course is manmade, using pumps and obstacles that can be moved and changed.

"The image and the reputation we can gain is to be truly a world-class water sports destination," he said, making Oklahoma City capable of hosting events to World Cup or World Championship standards. He said what would set Oklahoma City apart is the urban setting and the combination of the flatwater and whitewater venues.

"The combination of those two things would be very popular," Knopp said.



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Cornett said Oklahoma City's downtown hotels and Bricktown entertainment district are unique among river venues, which are often on the edge of a city instead of located in its heart.

"The location could not be more ideal," said David Yarborough, executive director of U.S.A. Canoe/Kayak, on the video.

Cornett said it's all part of trying to get Oklahoma Citians to get outside, move more and be healthier. The venue would be family-friendly, as kayaking is an ideal sport for people of all ages and abilities.

The grandstand would be built on the south bank of the river. Within the grandstand would be the floating stage where a variety of entertainment could be staged, from musical performances to plays.

'IT WILL CHANGE THIS CITY'

Proponents of MAPS 3 say it would bring connectivity between the north and south sides of the river, and the Bricktown canal would also be connected. The public would be able to ride water taxis to the river venue.

"It will change this city," Cornett said. "As dynamic as the last 10 years have been, the next 10 will be even better. ... It's a statement about Oklahoma City. It's transformational."

Knopp said the initial investment made from the original MAPS brought private investment dollars to the river.

"And we'll continue to see private investment," he said. "It will dwarf public investment."

So far, three additional boathouses are planned along the north side of the river near the Chesapeake Boathouse.

Devon Energy is partnering with Oklahoma City University's rowing team for one of the boathouses, planned for completion in October 2010.

Knopp said the design is finalized for the University of Oklahoma boathouse, and the University of Central Oklahoma is planning its boathouse and finalizing the design.

An iconic, four-story finish line tower is also being constructed from private dollars near the Lincoln Boulevard bridge.

Knopp said the Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation has put together a mobile, walk-through, interactive exhibit in a 35-foot trailer to help preview the vision for the river. It will be at every home University of Oklahoma football game, schools and at many other locations before the Dec. 8 vote.

"It will help educate the public," he said.

The first MAPS included \$53 million in improvements to the river, such as three dams and a series of locks that allowed boats to go through the seven miles of river. That created an unexpected benefit of having a smooth, straight stretch of river, bringing national rowing and kayaking competitions.

"The economic impact of the events has really been quite significant," Cornett said. "Most people vastly underestimated the impact that improving the river would make. It was a ditch. ... We used to mow it, now we row it."

Recently, Oklahoma City was named the rowing and kayaking training site for the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic teams.

"It's very unique that we have these Olympic rings," Knopp said. "We will become an international destination, and that's a pretty cool thing for Oklahoma City."

FOR THE HEALTH OF IT

Mayor Mick Cornett cites predictions that Oklahoma City's senior population is estimated to double by 2030 when he talks about plans for senior aquatic centers.

Those demographics and the citizens' expansive waistlines and high obesity rates inspire a \$50 million MAPS 3 project to build multiple health and wellness aquatic centers geared to the city's seniors.

Cornett is aware that exercise can become difficult when joints age and get creaky with arthritis or loss of cartilage, translating to achy knees, hips, backs and shoulders.

He estimates about four or five centers would be built around the city.

"What we'd be building here (are) health and wellness centers with significant aquatic elements. ... We want to build what people want."

He said if the MAPS 3 measure passes Dec. 8, the city would likely be looking to partner with perhaps YMCAs or universities to operate the facilities. The MAPS committee would get community feedback to determine what emphasis would be for each center.

No land or sites have been determined or purchased yet, he said.

What are the operational costs?

"We do not have operational costs on the aquatic centers since we do not know how many there will be or how big they will be," said Kristy Yager, city spokeswoman.

The \$50 million for aquatic centers will likely be much more than seniors got from the first MAPS vote.

A sales tax rebate of up to \$32 per person per year was given to seniors who applied for the rebate during about the five years the original MAPS penny sales tax was in place, according to Tom Anderson, special projects manager for the City of Oklahoma City.

The rebate was not used in the MAPS for Kids project.

VIDEO

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