

# Work on whitewater course may start early next year

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Work on the Chattahoochee River may start early next year to breach two dams and bring 2.5 miles of whitewater rafting to Columbus.

“We are still in the design and permitting phases,” said Richard Bishop, president of Uptown Columbus Inc. and the developer of the project. “We hope in the next couple of months to have all the permitting completed and if everything goes in the direction we think it’s going in, we hope to be working in the river sometime after the first of the year.”

Restoring the river to its natural flow is expected to cost \$23 million between North Highlands dam to the Dillingham Street Bridge. The Eagle & Phenix dam below the 13th Street Bridge and City Mills dam at 18th Street will be breached, making whitewater rafting and kayaking available by the end of 2012, Bishop said.

Bishop said Uptown has to get approval of environmental permits and deregulation of the Eagle & Phenix hydro dam, which used to generate about \$2,000 worth of power every month. Officials are working through the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to shut down the power generation.

Last week, Uptown secured some funding from the city when Columbus Council approved a memorandum of understanding for the River Restoration Project. Under the agreement, the city will spend \$5 million over the next three years toward the project. The annual allocation will be about \$1.6 million.

Deputy City Manager David Arrington said the agreement puts a mechanism in place to allocate funds to the nonprofit corporation. The funds are part of the city’s \$280 million budget for fiscal 2011.

To help in funding the project, the city applied for \$10 million in stimulus money from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration but wasn’t successful.

“We weren’t awarded anything on that,” Arrington said.

The city is seeking a smaller grant from NOAA and has received favorable feedback on it.

“We feel pretty good about it,” Arrington said. “We have a number of other grant opportunities relating to that. It’s an environmental project, an economic development project. We are going to continue to pursue other grant opportunities.”

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After the project is completed, some type of contract between the city and Uptown Columbus will be presented to council on the whitewater operations, Arrington said.

“That will probably be a couple of years down the road,” he said.

Uptown Columbus will give the city the area which consists of about 121 acres known as Eagle Phenix and City Mills. It will become the Chattahoochee River Park with the city leasing the property back to Uptown Columbus. Like similar operations in north Georgia, it will be considered a park with outfitters, policies and procedures for the operation, Arrington said.

“They use that park area and take people down with guides that go through the rapids with them and it’s a business,” Arrington said of outfitters. “It will be similar to that operation.”

The park featuring whitewater rafting could be an economic boom to Columbus, according to a study by Columbus State University. It could attract 188,000 users and most of those will come from out of town. With an estimated 10 spectators for each paddler on the river, the riverfront could attract 1.5 million people to the area each year with a total economic impact of \$42 million a year.

Peter Bowden, president of the Columbus Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, said those goals and projections are realistic with the whitewater project.

“People are already buzzing about it,” Bowden said.

Whitewater’s impact may be similar to the same attraction of the Chattahoochee Riverwalk.

“We feel like this is going to change downtown Columbus and Columbus overall just like when the Riverwalk came on line, things changed,” Bowden said.