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CSU team touts revitalization plans, possibilities for area park

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FLORENCE — Expanded wetlands, new amenities and revitalized native vegetation could reinvigorate the Florence River Park if the Southern Delivery System is built in Fremont County.

Representatives of Colorado Springs Utilities conducted a media tour Thursday afternoon at the park to explain revitalization plans and possibilities.

“We will make improvements to the park,” said Bruce Spiller, SDS Program Manager. “Every place we work, we leave it equal to or better than we find it. This park is going to work in concert with this diversion.”

SDS would construct a new diversion just across the Arkansas River from the park, requiring other improvements to ensure appropriate water flows throughout the year regardless of water levels. A screen near the intake would separate fish, which would move back to the river in a return canal. Screens also would separate sedimentation for removal by truck.

Because the diversion could not change the river upstream, water would be routed around the park during peak flows.

“With the route south of the river, we will make modifications and improvements to the park for compatibility,” Spiller said.

A boat chute through the diversion would allow kayaks, rafts and other watercraft a safe route. A boat launch and recovery ramp just upstream, in the northwest corner of the park, would allow safe exit of the river, as well.

The proposed park improvements emphasize ecological, recreational and educational benefits. Improved aquatic habitat would mean enhanced fishing, while developed trails and interpretive signage would abound throughout the park.

CSU also would work to eradicate non-native plant species, such as tamarisk and Russian olive trees, to allow the re-growth of native vegetation. Workers would remove trash and clean out water channels to allow for continual water flows, naturally removing the algae that now is prevalent in places.

“This park would return to a more native ecosystem,” said Carolyn J. Browning, Associate Scientist with CH2M Hill of Englewood. “These are high-quality wetlands, but they could be so much better.”

Browning said the natural habitat would attract additional wildlife like more blue herons, owls and eagles.

“We will replenish all of these wetlands with new water,” Browning said. “Willows and cattails will thrive.”

Other enhancements at the park could include playgrounds, barbecue pits, pavilions, bridges over the wetlands, picnic areas and more.

Across the river, the required pump station would be built to blend into the hillside. Spiller said the architecture of the building has not been decided, because CSU will accept input and work with the wishes of the community. On another CSU project, a pump station was constructed to look like a red barn, just one example of building to merge with the scene.

“We will try to keep it as natural as possible,” Spiller said.

The required power lines would be single pole, installed to be as unobtrusive as possible.

“We want to make this a fully-functioning park,” Spiller said.

Daniel Higgins, SDS Construction and Delivery Program Manager, said the diversion is a critical point for the success of the project.

“It is in our best interest to make sure it’s in good condition,” Higgins said. “It’s a really great starting point here.”