

PRB

Enjoying The Glide

By Andrew Cushman

When Berry Ellison strolled into the presentation for the Riverfront Park Redevelopment Program, he didn't know he was about to welcome the city of Spokane's version of New York City's famous Rockefeller Center.



"I had no idea what an ice ribbon was, and I think it's safe to say many Spokane residents didn't know at the time either," says Ellison. "I'm really glad we learned because our ice ribbon has been a game changer for the community. Originally, we

wanted a skating rink that was small and intimate. We ended up with an attraction, a landmark, and a point of pride.”

As manager for redevelopment for Parks & Recreation, Ellison is overseeing a \$64-million program to modernize, refresh, and reinvent the 40-acre park. With a history dating to the 1800s, the redevelopment has sought to update the park without losing its unique character. The three-acre ice ribbon project, which cost approximately \$10 million, is the first of its kind west of the Rocky Mountains. The ribbon is 16 feet wide and 700 feet long, with a slight undulation throughout the ice trail. A more-traditional rink totaling 3,500 square feet adjoins the ribbon, which is surrounded by three fire pits, concession stands, and plenty of relaxing areas to enjoy the scenic landscape.

Bustling With Activity

A short glide away is the ticketing facility, where skates are available to rent. Admission for the ice ribbon is based on a time-allotment schedule, signified by different-colored wristbands. More than 52,000 guests last year rented 44,000 pairs of skates, generating \$500,000 in just the first two months of operation.

“During the winter, it’s been absolutely packed. People love it,” Ellison says. “We’ve had to regulate entry and exit of skaters because the ice gets too full. There were times we struggled to keep up with the changing out of skates.”

Up to 400 skaters can use the ice ribbon at any time for 90-minute intervals before the ice needs to be resurfaced or “Zambonied.”

“We knew the ribbon would be an active area, but it’s also become a spectator sport,” Ellison says. “We have grandparents, moms, dads, aunts, and uncles flocking to the edges of the ribbon to watch. The number of people passing by to stop and watch was greater than expected.”

The ribbon hosted more than 700 free ice skating lessons, a dog fashion show, a yoga on ice event, free skate nights, holiday gift raffles, and miscellaneous games for kids, not to mention five marriage proposals.

“The ribbon has activated a portion of the park in the winter months when it used to be quiet,” Ellison says. “It’s also employing people. We have folks working the skate rentals, leasable party rooms, concessions, and a full-service kitchen; and there is plenty of power and lighting around the ribbon for other events.”

When spring ushers warmer weather, the ice ribbon is easily converted to accommodate walking, jogging, skateboarding, roller-skating, and scooters, as well as continuing to serve as the anchor venue for community events and activities, such as food-truck rallies, art walks, and craft fairs.

“We installed a special service box for power that allows us to host small concerts or theatrical performances during the warmer months,” Ellison says. “The refrigerated concrete slab is thick and durable; we could literally host a summer car show on the ribbon if desired.”

Safety is a crucial aspect of ribbon usage. All skaters must wear helmets, which are available for free, as well as other protective gear, such as knee and elbow pads. The flow, speed, and volume of traffic on the ribbon are also closely monitored. In addition, there are designated skating sessions and classes for different levels of skaters.

One activity not permitted on the ribbon is bicycling. “It’s a safety precaution because bikes move at a higher rate of speed, and when the ribbon is congested, it could cause injuries,” Ellison says. “Park Operations discussed it at length, and the end result was to stay on the side of caution. Park Operations made decisions on

each activity on a case-by-case basis, weighing the pros and cons before making a final determination.”

Sun And Shade Factors

“Any owner considering a skating ribbon should understand a couple of important factors,” says Matt Walker, Project Manager for Hill International, which is providing project and construction-management services for the city’s program.

“First, an ice ribbon is not a sporting facility for athletes. It’s not for hockey play or figure skating. It is a community facility and a gathering place. Second, ice generation can be challenging. You can only manufacture ice when evening temperatures are close to freezing or lower. Scheduling program events at the beginning and end of the winter season can be challenging.

“Another major influencer is exposure to sun and shade. The way the sun and shade hit the ice’s surface is important. You need to investigate the nearby buildings, trees, and any obstructions that would impact sunlight influencing the quality of the ice.”

Ellison adds, “Our ice ribbon is uncovered, so it’s exposed to sun and shade, as well as rain and snow, which makes it harder to maintain. The decision to cover it or not to cover it was fiercely debated. A cover/canopy is a critical factor because it can mitigate risks to operations. If you can prevent the snow and rain from falling onto the ice, maintenance is reduced and shoulder season weather is less of an impact. However, at our ice ribbon, a cover was expensive and would obstruct the scenic views of the area that make this ribbon unique.”

Ellison also cautioned prospective owners of challenges during start-up. “There are trials and tribulations when moving into operation. Training the staff, generating and maintaining the ice, snow removal, and equipment procedures are all factors that need to be tackled.”

While the city was optimistic, Ellison admits the stakeholders involved could not have predicted its resounding success. “It’s become woven into the fabric of the community, and has been requested for school field trips, birthday parties, and private business events. Our nearby downtown businesses are very happy with the increase in foot traffic. We’ve had multiple marriage proposals. It’s just become a beacon of activity and a must-see attraction in our city.”

Sounds a lot like Rockefeller Center.

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