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Restoring Creek & Removing Tailings Will Help Butte Economy

A Column for the Montana Standard by Evan Barrett

June 21, 2018

My name and face pops up these days related to the Restore Our Creek Coalition. But some Butte folks may also recall my economic development work. After helping get the copper mines reopened back in 1985-86, I spent eighteen years at the helm of the Butte Local Development Corporation, followed by eight years as head of Montana Economic Development. Since 2013, at Montana Tech and as a Butte retiree, I continue to pitch in where I can on economic development here in Butte.

This eco-devo background flavors and informs my activities as a member of the Restore Our Creek Coalition (ROCC). ROCC's activities, along with so many others, are designed to help Butte recover from over a century of environmental devastation that preceded the passage of the Superfund Law. Those activities have greatly improved the quality of life, environmental safety and aesthetics of Butte. But we still have so much more to do.

Restoring Silver Bow Creek into a free-flowing meandering stream as it runs through the heart of Butte AND removing all the tailings in the historic creek, will not only impact our environment and our quality of life, it will also affect the economic future of our community.

These are no longer academic concepts, especially now that the Consent Decree (CD) is almost final. We need to make sure that Butte's triple objectives of 1) restoring the creek, 2) removing the tailings and 3) having a proper and beneficial end land use are not washed away forever by the pressure of money and time. The EPA, under Regional Administrator Doug Benevento, and all the other parties are to be complimented for targeting removal of virtually all corridor tailings. But they have yet to really commit to creek restoration by designing a creek into the CD plans. We need to insure we integrate a restored creek and produce a beneficial end land use that drives the decisions. "One out of three" is not enough, especially with our economy at stake.

Now, nobody does economic development better than Butte. We're more aggressive, creative and open to growth than anywhere else in Montana. We've come back from being a plant closure city, surviving economic dislocation that would've turned lesser communities into ghost towns. Notwithstanding Butte's unique record, we still have room for and need much more growth.

Our growth rate is outstripped the other large Montana cities that surround us. Why? I suggest that despite being so unique, despite being the best place in Montana to live and raise a family, despite all that we have done to improve Butte's environment and aesthetics, despite the fact that we all love Butte dearly, our city still is not wonderfully attractive "at first glance." That has been proven to hurt us economically again and again. Restoring Silver Bow Creek between Montana Street and Texas Avenue, removing the "acid factory" tailings, and providing a park-like area for community use

will make that critical and highly-visible location attractive to both our citizens and those who see Butte for the first time.

Many of you can recall heading west on the interstate and looking down to the right at the Colorado Tailings. That previously ugly lunar landscape west of Montana Street now holds a meandering Silver Bow Creek. A similar restored Silver Bow creek east of Montana Street will redefine the way we see ourselves. It will also redefine how others see us as almost all Butte visitors first stop at the Chamber Visitor Center, just across the street from the ugliness that now gives them their first and often lasting impression of Butte.

All participants in the Consent Decree are now working together. The citizens of Butte are watching to see that their vision is accomplished. ROCC will hold several public meetings so your voice can be heard, just like when 3500 folks signed ROCC petitions to restore Silver Bow Creek and remove the tailings in the corridor from Montana Street to Texas Avenue. Future generations will appreciate the aesthetics and quality of life we produce. But they'll also appreciate our efforts, through this, to create more and better jobs for our families and our economic future.

Watch for ROCC's meeting notices as we all work together toward a better future.

Evan Barrett, a member of the Restore Our Creek Coalition, lives in historic Uptown Butte. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and occasionally teaches Montana history and contributes to community and economic development projects.

(706 words in the body)