

Millrace crossroads

The future of the Eugene waterway is uncertain now that it's not needed by the UO

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The Eugene Millrace is out of a job.

Earlier this month the University of Oregon threw the final switch on a brand-new and much more efficient chilled water plant, the system that cools buildings, labs and high-tech equipment on campus. And when that happened, it officially ended the last practical job the millrace had, and one it has done for half a century.

So what's next for the sluggish waterway that winds along the south bank of the Willamette River, exiting from the river near the Knickerbocker Bicycle Bridge and rejoining the river near the Eugene Water & Electric Board headquarters?

For the time being, nothing. The university will continue to operate the millrace much as it has since the 1950s. But it won't keep doing it forever and is hoping to start a conversation about who should have responsibility for the now-urban waterway.

"We're managing it; we're not going to let any flooding or other problems occur," said George Hecht, the UO's associate vice president for campus operations.

But now that the new plant is operational, he said the university will "begin a little more aggressive efforts to see what other ideas people have, are we the best ones to manage this, is there another entity that's better?"

Until the new plant came online, the UO used water from the millrace as part of its heat exchange system, using it to cool water that was pumped to campus buildings for air conditioning and equipment cooling and then absorbing the heat from the warm water that came back. The new plant has cooling towers that use outside air to do that job, at substantially lower cost.

But it's still costing the university about \$50,000 a year or more to run the pumps that take water from the Willamette River and raise it up to the level of the millrace so it flows downhill to its outfall near the EWEB steam plant. In its current configuration, the millrace is not a natural waterway, and without the pumps its only source of water would be rainfall and the runoff from streets.

Exactly who is responsible for the millrace is complicated. The city doesn't own it; it essentially belongs to the people who own the property it flows past, the largest of which is the UO.

The university, through the state Board of Higher Education, also owns the millrace water rights, said Eric Wold, the city of Eugene's natural resources manager. The UO has one water right for 13.2 cubic feet per second of Willamette River water for its cooling plant, and an additional 36.8 cfs for recreation, "including swimming, boating and scenic enhancement."

Those water rights conceivably could be transferred to the city or some other entity. They could be sold, given away or even abandoned to the state.

But the city has substantial interest in the millrace also. The waterway serves as a storm runoff channel, draining an area of about 620 acres between downtown and the university.

Any change in the millrace operation or use that affected its ability to handle runoff is something the city would want to be involved in, Wold said.

Right now, the millrace is managed under an agreement dating back to the 1950s or 1960s between the university and city, setting out their separate responsibilities. On the city's part, Wold said that amounts to maintaining and cleaning the intake pipes east of campus and west of the Knickerbocker bridge.

The UO maintains and runs the pumps, including maintaining the screens that keep fish from being sucked into the pumps. The university also balances the water flow to ensure that the millrace has enough capacity to handle winter rainstorms.

The question now is who should continue to do that, or should the millrace be converted to some other use. Some people ardently support exposing to daylight the portions of the millrace that now run through underground pipes, and Wold said some have suggested turning it into a seasonal walkway.

"Some planning and some forward thinking about what is the optimum use of the millrace is probably justified," said Hecht. "The community has lots of interest and it's just about perfect timing for another look at it."