

The Long, Long Project

Client:
Estes Park Urban Renewal Authority,
Estes Park, Colo.

Designer:
Design Studios West Inc.,
Denver

Contractor:
Heath Construction,
Fort Collins, Colo.

Having a pleasant pedestrian walkway along Fall River has been one of the Estes Park Urban Renewal Authority's main goals. The final links were finished this spring. (Photo courtesy Design Studios West Inc.)

By K. Schipper

ESTES PARK, Colo. – If you think of long-running jobs as those lasting weeks, or even months, you might want to reconsider your definition.

The Estes Park Urban Renewal Authority (EPURA) will wrap up 24 years of streetscape, riverwalk construction and retaining-wall work later this year. And that's only because the funding mechanism proving more than \$18 million to do the work is coming to an end.

What makes the project even more remarkable is that the work has been overseen by one design firm and one general contractor. That, and the fact that everyone involved would like to see it renewed and expanded into other areas of this gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park.

Getting Going

Sometimes big problems can be resolved with small fixes. However, EPURA's birth in 1982 came as the result of a big problem that needed a big solution.

This bustling tourist community in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains suffered an unlikely natural disaster. The collapse of the Lawn Lake Dam on Fall River above the town generated a flood that devastated its downtown and nearby areas.

In response, the town created a separate governmental entity to eliminate physical and economic blight and to plan and implement physical improvements aimed at enhancing the economy and the community.

Governed by a seven-member board and staffed by an executive director, EPURA spent the last 25 years transforming the Estes Park downtown into, as its own materials describe it, "a showplace of award-winning functional amenities wrought by tasteful urban design."

Both Wil Smith, EPURA's executive director, and John Lanterman, principal with the Denver-based Design Studios West Inc. (DSW) providing the design work for the makeover, say consistency has been the key to making this long-term effort work.

Smith, who has only been with EPURA for the past eight years, says the town was really interested in doing something to its downtown even before 1982. However, the flood helped move things into gear.

Following a number of public meetings, the town opted to set up the urban-renewal authority and fund it through a state mechanism that allows it to tap into what are perceived as increases in property taxes and sales taxes generated by the authority's activities.

Both have been so successful that a large portion of the funds have been returned to the town's general fund.

"They couldn't afford to let us keep it all," says Smith.

Despite pre-flood discussions on improving the town's downtown area, Smith says the real planning for EPURA's efforts came as part of that organization's earliest activities.

"There were a number of public meetings to help develop the plans,"



Where possible, existing boulders were incorporated into site-poured retaining walls along the riverbanks. Recreation and fish habitat were also considered. (Photo courtesy Design Studios West Inc.)

says EPURA's executive director. "We started with plans to just improve the pedestrian experience, with new sidewalks and landscaping and hardscaping."

Maintaining...and Changing

To make those plans — and what's happened subsequently — into reality, EPURA chose Design Studios West following a standard selection process.

Although he wasn't on the job at the time, Smith believes it was a good marriage from the very beginning.

"As luck would have it, they were getting going just about the same time we were getting going," he says. "They're a good group. It's a small firm of very talented people, and we've used them consistently."

DSW's Lanterman says that firm began by helping EPURA develop a master plan.

"We had to determine what was the big vision for this," says Lanterman. "That's where things can be really fun. We looked at context and the big picture. We tried to define what was going on and what we could do to make Estes Park better. We also had to ask what the people who live and work here want and what those who visit here want. And, we had to bring all the pieces together."

Smith explains that EPURA started in 1983 by doing what it had said it would do: improve the streetscape with an emphasis on the community's main street, Elkhorn Ave.

"At first, we just wanted to

improve the pedestrian experience with new sidewalks, landscaping and hardscape," he says. "That was done over several years in four phases."

Smith describes the overall look as, "refined mountain rustic," and says the community has been able to keep that theme through those four phases and subsequent streetscape work thanks to DSW and the presence of its other partner in this long-running project: Heath Construction of Fort Collins, Colo.

"Heath has built just about everything that's been built in terms of the streetscape and the riverwalk," says Smith. "We've been using the same folks and since it's a primary concern, that approach has resulted in good consistency. We've been able to maintain pretty high design and construction standards. It's worked well."

Good Relationships

Heath, too, was in its first decade of operation when it began working with EPURA. Company president Randy DeMario says the firm has enjoyed its relationship with the agency, at least in part because in recent years the contracts between the two have been negotiated, rather than bid.

However, DeMario says that approach, too, helps maintain the consistency that's occurred.

"Obviously, they're using taxpayer dollars, and they want to make sure the design elements they want are also what they can afford," he says. "We've had a very good relationship with them."



For the most part, site-poured concrete retaining walls were left plain to maintain year-to-year consistency. A form liner has given the surface some texture. (Photo courtesy Heath Construction)

Both Lanterman and DeMario say their firms have worked together to maintain the look of the hardscape.

“Most of the products we’ve used have been taken from the quarries here locally,” says DeMario. “There are quarries near Longmont (Colo.) that provide the cut stone we’ve used for the walkways and the pavers. For some of the work in the river, we’ve mined a mountain, and now the town keeps boulders available.”

In much the same way, the company has site-cast the retaining walls used along the riverwalk without much surface improvement to it for consistency. Where possible, however, the walls have utilized stone that was already in place.

“For instance, on this latest phase, there are some large rock outcrops, and I wanted to save as much of the rock as possible,” says Lanterman. “Heath is really into that. At one point it looked like they would have to be demolished and removed, but Heath went ahead and found it was more stable than they originally thought, and we’ve been able to tie some of the concrete work directly back into these large rock outcrops.”

One of the contractor’s great skills is value-engineering, he adds.

Lanterman says he’s worked closely with EPURA on some of the other design elements.

“Since we’re specifying the materials, we’ll say, ‘They no longer make this,’ or, ‘The pole height you

wanted is no longer made; what do you want to do?’” the designer explains. “There are a million and one questions behind every single thing the public sees out there.”

Smith says probably the biggest challenge the project has faced in that respect was with its lighting fixtures. Initially, the plan incorporated a candy-cane fixture, but over time fewer companies made them, and the price kept rising.

“A couple years ago, the town became very conscious of light pollution,” Smith says. “We did a study and came up with a different fixture that – in my opinion – is more attractive and did a lot less polluting of the skies. We’ve been replacing the old ones with the new ones, and it’s a change for the better, both functionally and aesthetically.”

The first phase of the riverwalk portion of the project began just about the time the first four phases of the streetscape were wrapping up in 1988. Despite its role in the 1982 flood, Smith says Fall River is a fairly nice natural feature running through downtown, but it had been neglected and become little more than a trash-laden eyesore.

“We said, ‘Let’s take advantage of this wonderful river,’ and so we came up with the idea of a riverwalk,” he says.

Key Piece

Finishing a final part of the

riverwalk is one of the key aspects of this year’s scope of work, according to DeMario.

“The original plan was to connect Fall River all the way through town,” he says. “This is the last section of the unimproved part of it. As the years have gone by, we’ve gone further up the river to give pedestrians a walkway through it. While it may have taken shape differently over the years, making the area pedestrian-friendly has stayed constant.”

Working along the river has presented some of the greatest challenges to the contractor and subs. Early on, Heath put its own equipment in the river.

While that hasn’t happened recently, DeMario says – because his team is skilled at working in the river – they remain to supervise the work while making sure clean water and erosion-control measures are in place.

DSW’s Lanterman says simply scheduling that work can be difficult.

“You have to do it when the river is down because you have to divert water or pipe it through the site so you can get in and build the walls and place the boulders,” the designer says. “We have a definite construction window each year when the work can be done from mid-January to about Memorial Day.”

By early February of this year, the Heath crew had already installed a 30” pipe to divert the river in order to install footers below the waterline, according to that company’s project superintendent, Jerry Grandt.

Grandt explains that this year’s scope of work includes five different phases, with the first two related to the river.

“Phase one involves about 150 feet of wall on each side of the river to contain it,” Grandt says. “We had to remove an existing walk bridge and do the preparation for a new walk bridge across the river.”

The second phase includes some 600 feet of wall, including work on both sides of the river. In order to get enough pedestrian area on the south



The need to get the work in the river completed before the spring snow melt meant work had to go forward during the winter months. The work in the stream bed was closely monitored due to environmental concerns. (Photo courtesy Heath Construction)

side, the company installed a two-tiered retaining wall.

“Because of the contours of the river and the existing buildings, this is how we could retain all the dirt,” says Grandt. “We needed to get the walkways along the buildings and have the lower wall still be above the 100-year floodplain.”

Although Grandt agrees that the site-cast walls have been left fairly plain for the sake of consistency, he

says they’re not totally barren.

“We’ve used a form liner on the face so it’s not just a blank concrete wall,” he says. “It’s got a textured look to it. There’s also an architectural reveal strip. We nail them to the face of the form so that when we cast the concrete it leaves an indentation. We tried to leave them rough to give a little texture, and there are two of them, running parallel, that show the demarcation of flood stage and

the 100-year-flood level.”

The final part of that phase of this year’s work involves pulling the pipe and then reclaiming that section of the river, including the creation of fish habitat and boulder placement.

Grandt describes this portion of the project as the key piece.

“The work we’re doing in the watershed – removing and replacing the failing walls – was necessary for protection, erosion control and flood control,” he says. “At the same time, it’s important to the aesthetics. The riverwalk pretty much goes all the way through town and this is the last section tying it all together.”

Finished...and Beyond?

Aesthetics are also important to the remainder of the work scheduled for this year, starting with the burying of utility lines to about 17 different businesses.

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Grandt says not only will cable, telephone and electric service be buried, but EPURA is putting in a new sanitary-sewer line for those buildings – which will remain unused for now – in anticipation of further growth.

The fourth phase will involve resurfacing the disturbed street, including a new catch basin and storm drain.

“Right now, we’re looking at installing a concrete street type similar to what we did the last time,” Grandt says. “We use a fine aggregate-mix concrete cut on a 4’ diamond pattern. Then, they take a chamfer wheel and open the cuts to give some accent. Finally, we sandblast it to expose the smaller aggregate. It’s a very nice surface, but labor-intensive.”

The last phase of the project involves installing what’s being referred to as a plaza, which will back up to the new wall installed in the river this year.

“We go in and bring everything up to grade and hit the drainage criteria,” the superintendent explains. “Then, we grade it with sand and then come in and install flagstones. We also install multiple concrete planters. But, the nicest feature is some heavy stone steps that will go down to the waterway from the courtyard.”

As with the work in the river, scheduling for the remaining phases of the project is critical.

One option is to do it immediately following the completion of the river work, which would tear up parts of the town during the summer tourist months of June and July. The other option is to return wrap up in September and October, when the community draws another large group of tourists.

“That’s still in negotiation,” says Grandt.

Regardless of exactly when this year’s phases actually wrap up, everyone involved is hopeful EPURA’s work can continue in the future, a goal that agency’s Smith says is already being worked toward. Given that it’s returned more than twice its cost in sales-tax growth, it’s little wonder Smith is enthusiastic

about it, and he can reel off a number of projects he’s still like to see instituted.

If that happens, both Heath and DSW hope to continue working with EPURA to provide the consistency they’ve brought to Estes Park for more than two decades now.

“EPURA loves the work that’s been done,” says DSW’s Lanterman. “It’s been extremely beneficial economically to the town. And, Heath Construction has been very good to

work with. They ask good questions, they keep everybody on task and they’re into value engineering. They’re great.”

“We hope we’ll work with EPURA in the future,” says Heath’s DeMario. “But, if its charter isn’t renewed, I think the town will take over beautification through a separate department and we have a long history of working with the town. We hope our relationship stays strong in the future.” ■



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