

# Walking the Greenbelt? Think of Gordon Bowen

Tim Woodward - Idaho Statesman

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Boise's Greenbelt is a local success story and a model for cities around the nation. As the Greenbelt nears completion, however, the person most responsible for it is all but forgotten.

Gordon Bowen isn't a public figure anymore. At 83, the former city parks director lives quietly in a modest North End home. Few would guess that he, more than anyone else, is the man to thank for the 17-mile phenomenon that is part of life for Idahoans beyond counting.

"You can't say enough about what he did for the Greenbelt, " said Boise Parks and Recreation Director Jim Hall. "It was his vision that brought people together to make it happen."

Former Park Board Member Alice Dieter goes further:

"He's the father of the Greenbelt. Without Gordon Bowen, we wouldn't have a Greenbelt."

Today, we tend to take the Greenbelt for granted. Newcomers in particular have no idea of the effort it took, or of what the river through town was like before there was a Greenbelt. The project was in part a response to a 1963 consultant's report saying Boise had ignored its most important asset.

"You could hardly get to the river in Julia Davis and Municipal parks, " Dieter said. "It was all wild and brambly. Trucks were dumping cement into it. The zoo was hosing its cages into it. The river wasn't something people gave much attention to or even thought about very much."

The consultant suggested a Greenbelt, but it was up to the city to make it happen.

Bill Onweiler, then a city councilman, remembers how it began:

"I was in a back room, talking ... about ways to prevent building in the flood plain. We were discussing it when Gordon came by and, with a twinkle in his eye, said, 'We could make it parks.' The Greenbelt was born at that moment."

At first, the idea wasn't popular.

"Everyone was against it, even the mayor, " Onweiler said. "It didn't look like it would happen until (fellow Councilman) Sherm Perry and I went to Washington to see Sen. Len Jordan.

"Sherm was a diehard Republican, but Jordan told us the one to see was Frank Church. Sherm swallowed hard, and we went to see Sen. Church. He made a couple of calls, got us \$100,000 to buy land, and there was no turning back."

Three decades, millions of dollars and untold obstacles later, the job is within a third of a mile of being finished. Bowen's persistence is one of the reasons why.

"He never got excited, " Dieter said. "He was always calm and steady, but he was relentless. He never gave up, and he never let a single detail fall by the wayside."

In the '60s, the Greenbelt was one of two in the nation. Now there are dozens. Hall gets several calls a month from cities wanting to use it as a model. Ultimately, he said, it could stretch all the way to Oregon. The man who started it all is quick to credit everyone but himself. Of his own role, he says only that it's "tremendously satisfying" to see what the Greenbelt has become.

Bowen used to walk the Greenbelt regularly. Now, health problems keep him away.

His chief regret: that the city didn't follow his recommendation and make it wider.

A modest memorial also would be nice. When they're enjoying the Greenbelt, people should know who made it possible.