

The calm after the storm

BY EVE NEWMAN / LBEDIT6@LARAMIEBOOMERANG.COM • WEDNESDAY, JUNE 30, 2010



Willow trees planted by the Laramie Beautification Committee help prevent erosion along the Laramie River. Andy Carpenean/Boomerang photographer

The Laramie River experienced unprecedented flooding this spring, reaching a high-water mark of about 3,600 cubic feet per second (cfs).

Since the U.S. Geological Survey started measuring the river in 1933, the highest flow on record was 3,250 cfs, according to Tom Wesche, a water consultant with Habitech Inc.

If the river looked like it did a year ago, those floodwaters would have caused serious problems for stretches of severely eroded banks bordering the Laramie River Greenbelt. However, the river's banks this spring had a different look, and just in time for the flooding.

Work started last fall on the Laramie River Restoration Project, a multi-year effort spearheaded by the Laramie Beautification Committee that is aiming to stabilize the river where it has been actively eroding its banks in response to unnatural crowding by a century of city development.

Contractors and volunteers completed work on six sites last fall — places where the erosion was the worst, including a couple bends in the river just north of where it passes under Interstate 80, with the greenbelt running along its east side.

"All of those sites were labeled as high-priority sites because the fear was one more high water, and the trail was going to wash out," Wesche said.

So far, that work has held up, and it has protected the greenbelt from being undercut by floodwater-induced erosion.

"The good thing about getting this big flood right off the bat is we got to test our design, and it appears, based on what we know so far, is everything's working," Wesche said. "We've got no erosion to the bike path, and I'm afraid if this work hadn't been done last year, I don't think we'd be looking at (the bike path)."

At one site, the river was cutting away at its banks a few feet from the greenbelt's asphalt. Workers at that site smoothed down the sheared-off bank, then anchored half a dozen large tree stumps so the rooted bases protruded 10 feet or so into the water. The trees were held in place with tons of rock.

"They're set with just a slight upstream angle to them so that when the high waters come over the top, that water is directed out back into the main channel away from the stream bank," Wesche said.

As the river level has dropped, Wesche has been able to confirm that all the trees are still in place.

On top of the trees, rock was placed to provide stability as well as to provide a resting place for sediment that will allow for the growth of vegetation.

Finally, willows were planted, facing toward the river at a low angle.

“The willows help to slow the water down as it comes over the top,” Tom Watson with Western Water Consultants said.

As floodwaters have receded, the willows are starting to show green leaves.

“It’s been under water for three weeks, so it’s just starting to pop back,” Wesche said of the vegetation.

Wesche said the floodwaters also deposited new sediment on the rocky banks, which will accelerate the revegetation.

The three-phase project includes 52 sites slated for improvements. Work on phase two will continue in August, when the river water is at its lowest for the year and the weather is still nice.