

COVID fears force bridge celebration, luminaria walk to pause

By Phil Drake, Great Falls Tribune

Within a matter of months, COVID-19 was able to derail a celebration that was 100 years in the making and dim the lights on a beloved annual event.

But hopefully for just a little while.

The 100th anniversary of the 10th Street Bridge was to be held Aug. 20, but the COVID-19 pandemic has put those plans on hold.



Arlyne Reichert with the 10th Street Bridge in the background. Tribune File Photo

Arlyne Reichert, the 94-year-old president of Preservation Cascade Inc., said she is heartbroken, noting that those who have worked so hard to save the bridge have planned this celebration for 25 years.

She stresses the celebration has been postponed, not canceled. She said she looks forward to the day when the virus has subsided and people can get together and celebrate.

The Luminaria Walk is an annual event that features more than 1,500 luminarias lining the trail from Gibson Park to West Bank Park. It was to be held Saturday, but has been postponed as well, said Bruce Pollington, president of the River's Edge Trail Foundation.



The blue lights on the 10th Street Bridge, shown here in 2009, are lit in honor of local people, causes, and holidays - TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

“With the COVID pandemic we decided there was too much risk,” Pollington said Friday, saying they feared the area would see an increase in coronavirus cases.

“Rather than cancel, we decided we would postpone it in the off-chance we would have decent enough weather later this fall,” he said, adding he did not know if the pandemic would ease.

“It is not looking like it will happen, but I have been wrong many times before,” Pollington said. “I do not want people to think we have given up on both of those (events).”



The 10th Street Bridge, GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE

The state had 6,216 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of Friday. Cascade County has 27 active cases, 161 recoveries and five deaths.



Bruce Pollington - RION SANDERS/GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE

Pollington said the luminaria walk was to include an observance at the bridge. He said it is hoped that the bridge will become part of the trail, if all goes well.

“Our foundation would like it from standpoint that it gives you a way to pause at the river and look safely,” he said, adding there would also be the option of holding events on the river.

Pollington said the River’s Edge Trail is 52 miles of trails in a system that is 12 miles long. He notes the bridge is owned by the city and the trails are the property of the city and state.

Reichert said she fell in love with the bridge the first time she saw it as "a young bride" in 1945.

She still swoons about its architectural design.

“You don’t see many bridges like that,” she said, noting it has eight arches and the only one of its kind between Minneapolis and Seattle.

She talks about how it not only connected Great Falls to abutting Black Eagle, but to Havre, which is 112 miles away.

“It was used as a main transportation route,” Reichert, who served at Montana's 1972 constitutional convention, said. “It was an integral part of Great Falls’ history.”

A 2015 article in the Great Falls Tribune says the vintage bridge across the Missouri River was the last big project championed by Paris Gibson, the city’s founder, before he died.

Preservation Cascade Inc. added lights to the bridge in 2007. It is now lit up on Fridays, Saturday and holidays, usually in someone's honor.

Reichert laughs now when she says she told her family in 1994 that she would devote just two years to saving the bridge

She and Pollington remain optimistic their celebrations will be held in the wake of the outbreak.

“This too shall pass,” Reichert said. “I just want to live to see the day the virus pandemic is over and we can return to normalcy.”