

**Las Colonias Park along the Colorado River in Grand Junction, CO:
Transformation of a Radioactive-Hazardous Waste Dump to the City's Premier
Business-Recreational River Park**

By Bill Dam

Many people associated with public-private organizations over several decades can be thanked for the cleanup and creation of Las Colonias Park. The site is located due south of Grand Junction's downtown along the Colorado River and Riverside Parkway. The multi-use site includes an amphitheater for concerts, business park offices, picnic areas, gardens, bike path, restroom facilities, river access and more. A river park along a side channel of the Colorado River is being constructed for use by kids, kayakers, and stand-up boarders.

City of Grand Junction employees took great care to preserve the history of the site by including signs at the park in collaboration with Colorado Mesa University (CMU). According to the [CMU history project](#), "Above all, the story of Las Colonias Park is the story of different people coming together to form communities. From the Spanish and Ute traders to the Hispanic migrants who built lives and homes on its banks to the more recent community-wide efforts to restore and preserve the riverfront, this stretch of land has been a convergence point for people and culture. After nearly 30 years of work, the land is poised to enter into a new era as a developed city park, but it is important that its history not be forgotten in the transition. The history of the Old Spanish Trail, the sugar beet industry, the uranium years, and the remediation and restoration of the land are all vital to the story of Grand Junction: these themes demonstrate both the various cultures and the economic changes that have shaped the Grand Valley."

In 1950, the Climax uranium mill began operating to produce yellowcake uranium resulting in the byproduct of over two million tons of waste tailings. The uranium mill operated for about 20 years and then became an auto junk yard mixed with low-level radioactive waste. The State of Colorado began in the early 1970's to deal with radioactive mill tailings that became used in concrete construction as the mill had offered "free sand." In 1978, the U.S. Congress passed the Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act (UMTRCA) and the program identified over 4,000 vicinity properties around the Grand Junction area that needed radon-radium mitigation. Department of Energy (DOE) built a new disposal site to remove the tailings away from the Colorado River.

After site remediation in 1994, the land was vacant for 20 years until the City obtained many sources of funding to enable redevelopment. Park construction occurred in phases including the Phase 2 amphitheater project with DOE providing federal permit reviews and a grant to support redevelopment of the former mill processing site as well as interpretive historical signs.

Transformation of Las Colonias Park was a grassroots effort by citizens with the Lions Club and many other organizations. Cleanup and redevelopment grew out of conflicts and collaborations between local, state, and federal agencies. A new wave of businesses, people attending concerts, as well as accessing the Colorado River are discovering the renewed beauty of Las Colonias Park.

A tour of Las Colonias Park is planned for Thursday, November 14 at 3:30 pm. Tour leaders include:

Trent Prall, City of Grand Junction Public Works Director, trentonp@gjcity.org

Ken Sherbenou, City of Grand Junction Parks and Recreation Director,
gjparksandrec@gjcity.org

Mike Cosby, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
michael.cosby@state.co.us

Bio: Bill Dam worked for the U.S. Department of Energy in Grand Junction, CO from 2012 to 2019 and recently retired from federal service to enjoy consulting and teaching. He served DOE as a site manager of many sites, including Las Colonias Park, as well as working on a variety of uranium mining and milling contaminated sites. Overall, he worked 25 years for four federal agencies and has over 10 years environmental consulting experience. He formed his consulting company *Conserve & Prosper LLC* to promote sustainability emphasizing energy and water conservation. Contact Bill at info@conserve-prosper.com