

Tempe Town Lake thrives despite setbacks

by **Dianna M. Náñez** - Nov. 14, 2009 10:46 PM

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Alex Dolotov still marvels that a 20-minute drive from his Scottsdale home to Tempe transports him from the Arizona desert to a narrow stretch of beach where he can feel sand under his feet.

An avid rower, the Ukraine native thought he would have to give up the sport when he moved to Arizona. But on Nov. 6, 1999, he took his scull to Town Lake, joining thousands of others for the lake's opening celebration and first day of public boating.

In the decade since, the lake has become the Valley's most visited attraction

"When I came here in '97, I never could have expected this lake would come," Dolotov says. "I come here three or four times a week."

Town Lake, in one form or another, was in the making for 30 years, since college students first envisioned a lake filling a dry riverbed and a park sprawling along the snaking waterfront.

Plans for the lake grew and shrank as swiftly as waters have historically flooded the river. The cost of building the lake surpassed \$40 million. Once water filled the 977 million-gallon lake in 1999, development came at a trickle until a real-estate boom generated long-awaited construction. A subsequent bust has virtually frozen all private development.

Through it all, setbacks and successes have earned equal notoriety.

Development plans for a lakeside luxury hotel and conference center never materialized. Rubber dams began to wear out before their warranty expired. Acres of undeveloped land have left the city covering much of the operating costs.

But Town Lake, created along a 2-mile stretch of the barren Salt River, is now a bustling public space. Millions of people boat, fish, jog, party or picnic at the lake. An arts center and splash playground on the south shore add to the activities.

Town Lake, at 10 years, stands as a marvel of urban recreation, with the potential to one day be on a par with the nation's greatest city parks, Tempe leaders and recreation experts say.

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After eating dinner at Monti's La Casa Vieja, a Tempe landmark that was built in 1871 and sits at the gateway from downtown to the lake, Ed and Jennifer Mank walk down to the water.

The couple had decided on a whim to make the drive from their



David Kadlubowski/The Arizona Republic

Mill Avenue crosses Tempe Town Lake.

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Town Lake by the numbers

- 220-surface acres, 2-miles long.
- 800 to 1,200-feet wide.
- Average depth of 12.5 feet, ranging from 7 to 19 feet
- Eight inflatable dams contain the 977 million gallon lake.
- It took 43 days to fill the lake with water.
- Each dam is 240-feet long and 16-feet tall on the west end of Town Lake and 5-feet tall on the east end of the lake.
- Each of the eight dam bladders weighs more than 40 tons.
- Initial construction costs for the lake alone, not including improvements to the surrounding park area: \$45,532,196
- Total lake cost since 1985: \$261,409,935
- Total economic impact since the lake opened in 1999 through May: \$414,674,251
- On average, more than 100 events are hosted on the lake annually.
- Nearly 2.8 million people visit the lake annually.

Source: Tempe

Glendale home to Tempe.

"It's so quiet and peaceful," Ed says, curling his arm around his wife.

Awaiting a boat tour under the stars, they sits on a bench overlooking the lake.

"There's nothing else like it in the Valley," Ed says.

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Looking at Town Lake now, it's hard to imagine that before it was created, Tempe Beach Park was falling into disrepair and the river bottom had become a garbage dump.

The course for the lake was set in 1966, when an Arizona State University architecture professor gave his senior class a project: Given the history of flooding on the Salt River, design a plan for developing the dry riverbed.

Without having to worry about costs, government red tape and public criticism, the students were allowed to be innovative, said Bill Close Jr., a Valley architect and one of the 16 students in the ASU class.

"We figured by the end of it we'd either have some pretty good ideas or else just plan a party in the riverbed," he said.

The students presented their "Rio Salado Project" to the Valley's city leaders at an ASU forum. One vision was to fill the Salt River with water from end to end. The ideas piqued the interest of city officials.

It took more than 20 years before the students' ambitious designs led to a proposal to create 28 miles of parks from 51st Avenue in Phoenix to the Granite Reef Dam in Mesa. That grand plan ended in November 1987, when Maricopa County voters turned down a property tax and bonds to finance the \$2.56 billion Rio Salado Project.

Tempe decided to take on its own portion of the project. City leaders saw the lake as a chance to spur significant growth in a landlocked, 40-square-mile city. Town Lake was 10 percent of the city's developable land.

Congressman Harry Mitchell, then Tempe's mayor, thought the lake was a visionary but far-fetched idea. It would cost millions to build a lake in a river-bed filled with old tires and trash.

"It was too grandiose to work," he said, recalling the proposal.

Critics, including current Tempe Mayor Hugh Hallman, said building a lake without developers to pay for the ongoing operations was irresponsible. Environmentalists worried about destroying wildlife habitat. Many feared the lake would flood and endanger people on the future lake's shores. At one point, red tape from county flood-control agencies, federal flight monitors and others had the city dealing with 26 government entities and countless regulations.

"On any given Thursday for two years, we could have thrown our hands up and given up," said former Mayor Neil Giuliano, who served after Mitchell.

To rally support for the lake, which would cost Tempe about \$46 million to build, city leaders wooed investors to help absorb the burden. One offered to build a five-star Peabody Hotel on the lake. Before that, there was talk of an aquarium.

The Peabody deal failed when the developer's financing fell through. But many thought there would have been no lake had the hotel not illustrated the potential for development.

"The Peabody Hotel was a validation," said Steve Nielsen, who worked for Tempe from 1989 to 2001 as the city's Rio Salado Project manager.

After 30 years of studies and plans, construction on the lake began in 1997. Water began pouring in on June 2, 1999, filling it by July 14. Town Lake officially opened on Nov. 6, 1999.

Close praised Tempe for imagining the makings of a jewel where others only saw a dump.

"(Tempe) saw the vision of what the water could bring as a focal point of activities," he said.

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Zhenyu Huang, 30, is trolling his fishing line along the waters on the north shore of Town Lake. Walking with him is his wife, Yijia He, 25, carrying a bowl for her husband's catch.

"I caught one," he yells, yanking his line out of the water. "I think it's a sunfish."

Huang is from China. He is attending ASU's electrical-engineering graduate program. He lives about a mile from the lake. In late October, he and a friend thought they would try fishing for the first time. They fared so poorly that an avid Town Lake fisherman took pity on the novices and spent two hours teaching them how to fish.

Only one week since his first attempt, Huang is discovering that fishing can be surprisingly good at Town Lake, which is stocked with trout, bass, catfish and sunfish.

"I've caught 30 to 40 fish," he says. "We've eaten fish seven to eight times this week."

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Tempe Town Lake is one of the state's most visited attractions, drawing nearly 2.8 million people last year. Marathons, rock concerts and festivals are among the more than 100 local and national events that are held at the lake annually.

Although development has yet to cover the majority of operating costs, many think the once-dry riverbed has exceeded expectations in becoming a model for urban recreation.

Even on quiet weeknights, desert dwellers from across the Valley are drawn to the water. Boaters and rowers are on the lake. Joggers, inline skaters and bicyclists travel the trails that line the north and south shores.

"From our imagination back in 1989 (when studies of the lake's master plan were being drafted) to what it's turned out, it's far, far exceeded our expectations," said Nielsen, who still oversees ASU's Town Lake waterfront property as a real-estate director for the university.

City reports, based on tourism data, show that visitors to the lake since it was built have spent \$118.2 million in the state on hotels, food, entertainment and other expenses.

The city still foots some costs for major events, but tourism experts say that the lake has raised the Valley's profile and ability to attract out-of-state promoters. P.F. Chang's Rock 'n' Roll Arizona Marathon and 1/2 Marathon and the Ironman Arizona triathlon bring the state thousands of out-of-state visitors.

"We wouldn't have the marathons we have here if it wasn't for the lake," said Michael Martin, executive vice president of Tempe's Convention and Visitors Bureau. "The Ironman obviously wouldn't be here because where would they have done the swimming competition? P.F. Chang's likes ending with its concert on the lake."

The lake's effect on adjacent land values is the most shocking statistic, said Nielsen, who was involved in late 1980s studies that looked at the viability of creating Town Lake.

The land "was appraised at about \$4 a square foot," he said. "We thought we would get it to about \$10 to \$12 a square foot."

A study last year appraised ASU's Town Lake property at \$42 a square foot, he said.

"From \$4 to \$42 . . . we were off by 1,000 percent," he said. "That's incredible."

Although the recession and financial turmoil have taken a toll, Valley real-estate experts believe that Town Lake will recover faster than most markets because of the central location near the airport, ASU, downtown Phoenix and Scottsdale.

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Melissa Avina is standing on the dock visiting her boyfriend, who works at the lake. The 21-year-old Chandler resident says she can't recall a time when Town Lake wasn't there.

"I love the lake because it just makes me feel like I'm not in the desert," she says. "I feel like I'm in a different city, like I'm in San Diego."

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Hallman believes the novelty, serenity and aesthetics of the lake will one day put it on a par with San Diego's Balboa Park or New York City's Central Park. Giuliano, who often tangled with Hallman when they served on the council together, agrees.

But stumbling blocks remain.

While many people believe the lake is a successful tourist attraction and urban-recreation mecca, the financial return for Tempe has yet to be fully realized.

Tempe has paid about 72 percent of the \$261 million costs related to the lake-area redevelopment since 1985. Last year, operations and maintenance fees spiked to \$3.3 million, nearly \$1 million more than the 1999 budget. Tempe's goal has been for private lake development to pay for 60 percent of annual lake operations and maintenance. Currently, private development pays for about 19 percent of that cost.

Although Hallman laments the expenses, he reasons that Town Lake and the Rio Salado Project are a public investment.

"Typically a park doesn't pay for itself. The government is supposed to supply public parks," he said. "(But) there is a possibility that in the very long term that there will be enough revenue to pay for the operations."

Adding to the expenses are the lake's west-end rubber dams, which began to deteriorate decades before expected. Replacement dams could cost the city as much as \$40 million.

Residents complain of mosquitoes that plague the wetlands surrounding the lake, as well as the chemicals used to control bugs.

Others who worry about the lake wasting water wonder why Tempe has yet to pipe in reclaimed water, as it promised years ago. Tempe officials said they are conducting water-quality studies that they hope will pave the way for this process.

While the list of lake headaches is long, one of the most commonly heard complaints is a result of its popularity. Many Tempe residents say the city allows too many events on the waterfront, preventing locals from enjoying the lake in peace.

Arthur Jacobson has lived in a neighborhood near Town Lake since 1962. He is a longtime critic of the lake.

"In the best weather they let this place get overrun with what I call the foreigners. (But) we're the ones who paid for it, still paying for it, we should be able to take our boats out without all that congestion," he said.

Hallman said he understands residents' frustration. He hopes to build more parks and plaza areas along the lake so people can enjoy it even when major events take place at Tempe Beach Park.

Although Jacobson enjoys boating on the lake, he said it was not worth the investment. He is also disappointed in the existing development Tempe allowed on the lake.

"I don't care how pretty it is. ... There will never be enough development to cover the costs," he said. "If they want it to be a public park like Central Park, then stick to that. There's not a bunch of condos in Central Park."

Despite the problems, many remain optimistic.

Hallman imagines a small swimming beach on the south shore and a lakeside boathouse. Tempe is discussing a plan under which a portion of the lake would be cordoned off, making it easier to control the water's quality and meet regulations for swimming. When the economy rebounds, Giuliano is convinced a major hotel will finally open on the lake's south shore.

Mitchell said the naysayers will always be critical, but he stands by the progress made in the lake's first decade.

"This was supposed to be a 30-year project," Mitchell said. "It's nothing like we planned. What's happened there, it is an unqualified success. It's still growing."

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On the eve of Town Lake's 10th anniversary, Alex Dolotov sets his ivory-colored scull into the water at the lake's north shore.

He comes to row often, in the day or at night when neon and white lights from the Mill Avenue and light-rail bridges illuminate the coal-colored water like a fireworks show.

Perched a few feet off the boat, a great blue heron hunting for a fish is unfazed by the city dwellers sharing the water. It is a peaceful refuge from a demanding city life, Dolotov observes, before rowing away from the shore, leaving a trail of ripples behind him.

Is Tempe Town Lake safe for swimming?

To allow swimming at Town Lake, Tempe must meet city, county, state and federal standards. There are separate standards for partial-body and full-body contact with lake water.

Partial-body contact is allowed, which means the water is safe for a person's body to come in contact with it during activities such as rowing. But it is not safe enough, year-round, for swimmers to submerge in it, where they could possibly ingest water or get it in their eyes, ears or noses.

Standards for safe swimming include limiting the water's coliform bacteria levels, ensuring it is not negatively affected by sewage or industrial waste, and keeping the pH level at a minimum of 5.0 and a maximum of 9.0.

To meet standards to allow swimming at events such as triathlons, Tempe must begin a process of treating and testing the water prior to the event.

Compounding matters in recent years, rains have increased the amount of upstream runoff water entering the lake from Indian Bend Wash or the Salt River. Runoff can carry waste, which contributes to algae growth and makes it difficult to maintain pH levels and water-quality standards for year-round swimming.

To address water quality at the lake so that it meets standards temporarily for swimming events, Tempe installed a piping system that reroutes upstream water around the lake and back into the river bed west of the lake.

Prior to swimming events, Tempe uses the piping system, tests the water quality and uses chemicals recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to maintain pH levels. The water is treated until it tests safe for swimming. If after several treatments water does not meet standards, swimming would not be allowed. To facilitate about six swimming events at the lake this year, Tempe spent about \$23,250.

Recently, Tempe began discussing a plan to cordon off a small area of the lake and focus treatments there. However, city officials have said it would be unlikely Tempe could recover the costs related to having swimming.

Tempe measures water quality weekly and posts the results online at [www.tempe.gov/lake /Water/](http://www.tempe.gov/lake/Water/).

<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/news/articles/2009/11/14/20091114townlake1115.html>