

MILL WHISTLE:  
SOUND OF AN ERA

Public Art Proposal for Brown Park



In McCall's early years logging and lumber production were principal industries largely responsible for the founding of McCall as a township. Several lumber mills were built over the years and all of them burned down. In fact the mill was built, burned down and rebuilt five times. The last mill burned down in 1984 at the current site of Brown Park.

A few artifacts were salvaged from the burn. The mill whistle being one of them.



The salvaged mill whistle is not only a historic artifact to McCall but these whistles are treasured, collected, and restored throughout the US as symbols of a bygone era. The sounds produced by the whistles are a unique way of audibly recalling the past.

The whistle was a daily time keeper for industries like lumber mills and factories. The whistle blow often became revered by the townspeople and they missed the sounds when the whistles stopped.



"I remember the mill sound coming in the morning early....and in the evening around dinner. I think the whistle was used for special occasions such as fire and other village notifications. I distinctly remember the whistle going off in the middle of the day during the summer '68 or '69, when the town was threatened by a timber fire close-by. Every able bodied man and boy put on hard hats, grabbed pulaskis/shovels and jumped into the back of pickups and headed out to the fire line. We (women) made tuna and other sandwiches, wrapped them in wax paper and put in paper bags. The bags, along with thermos's of coffee were handed out to the passing pickups going on Main street(aka Lake street) as they headed out to the fire line.

The last time the whistle blew, it was on the night the mill closed. Story goes that a couple of workers decided to break into the building and around midnight, the town heard a sustained 20 minutes of a mournful sound echoing over the lake. I was told that a long, whistle was the traditional symbol of a death. No one complained of the noise because the entire area knew what it meant- their mill and that part of the villages life was gone forever." - Marlee Wilcomb of McCall Idaho



The Sinker Davis Co. manufactured the whistles and called them gongs. There are two bells, one on each side of the valve chamber. The bells create a two tone harmony; a deep resonant sound rather than a piercing shrill.

The restored whistle in this example shows the original black finish, the valve and lever that allows steam to enter the whistle, and the raised lettering of the Sinker Davis Company name.



Restoring the whistle is necessary before creating the sculpture. McCall's mill whistle is cracked but is repairable. Part of the restoration is to test the whistle with steam and ensure it functions properly or if it is in need of additional repairs.

If this project is chosen the finish can be discussed and test samples created. It could be restored to its original color or it could be bronzed as it is shown in the drawings that follow. The whistle is the show-cased artifact of the sculpture and therefore should be prominent.

The example shown here is a restored 12" Sinker Davis whistle on display at a steam whistle convention. McCall's whistle is a 8" whistle.

Allowing the whistle to blow with steam again would be a spectacular visual display. Not only would you have the sound but the visual dynamic of the steam would be very impressive! However, steam requires specialty equipment, regular inspections, maintenance of the equipment and sculpture and safety precautions with the public with the whistle blows.

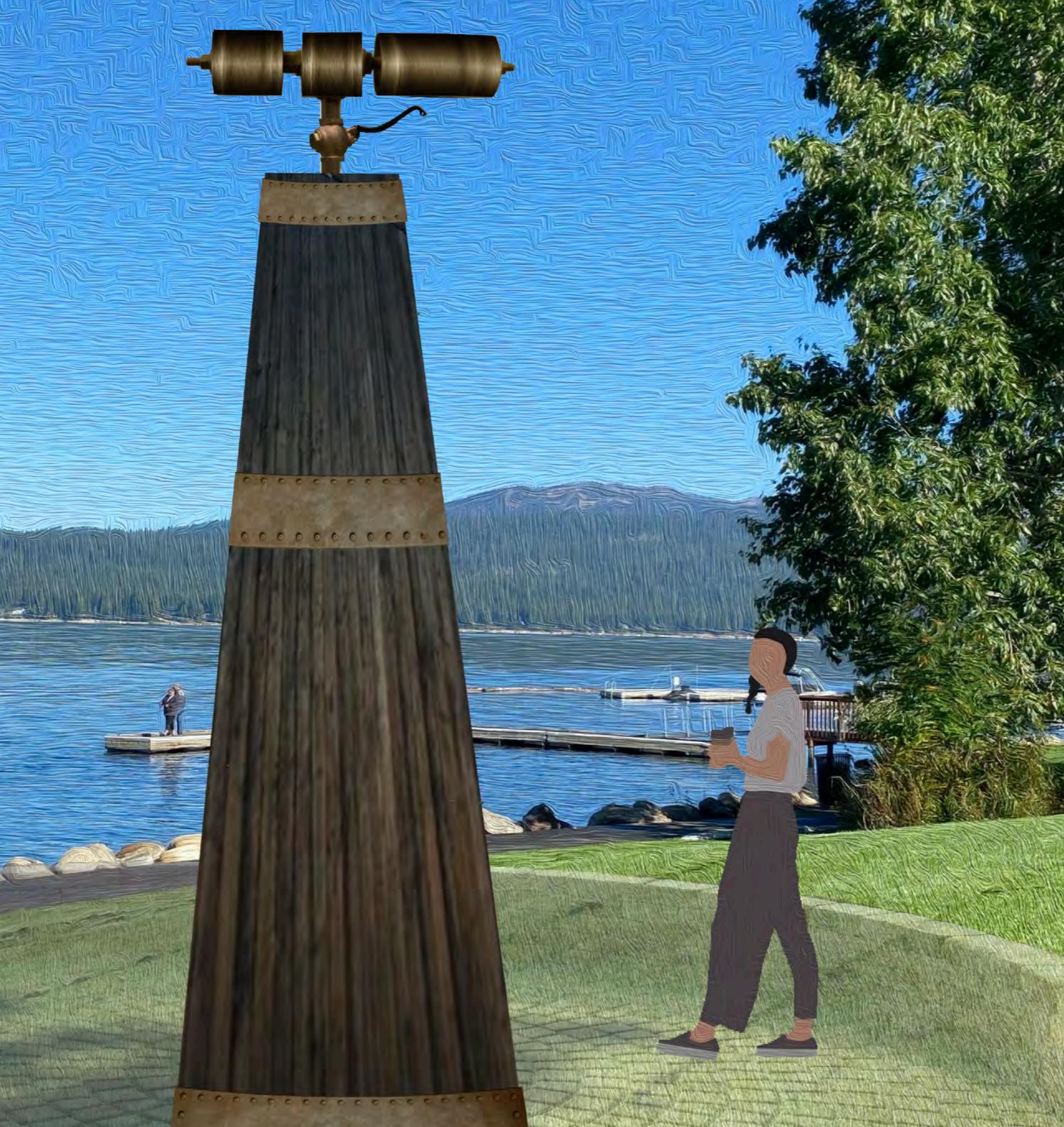
The steam generating equipment could be housed in a permanent location near the sculpture. Another option could be to acquire a portable steam generating machine on a trailer so that the equipment could be stored off site.

Either method would be engineered to create the necessary volume of steam and pressure to make the whistle blow. And when it did, people would never forget the experience!



This public art project is meant to give back to McCall the sound that embodied the character and livelihood of the town for decades. It is meant to create a new “village” tradition of blowing the whistle at key times of year both as a honoring of the past and also a distinct celebration of the present.



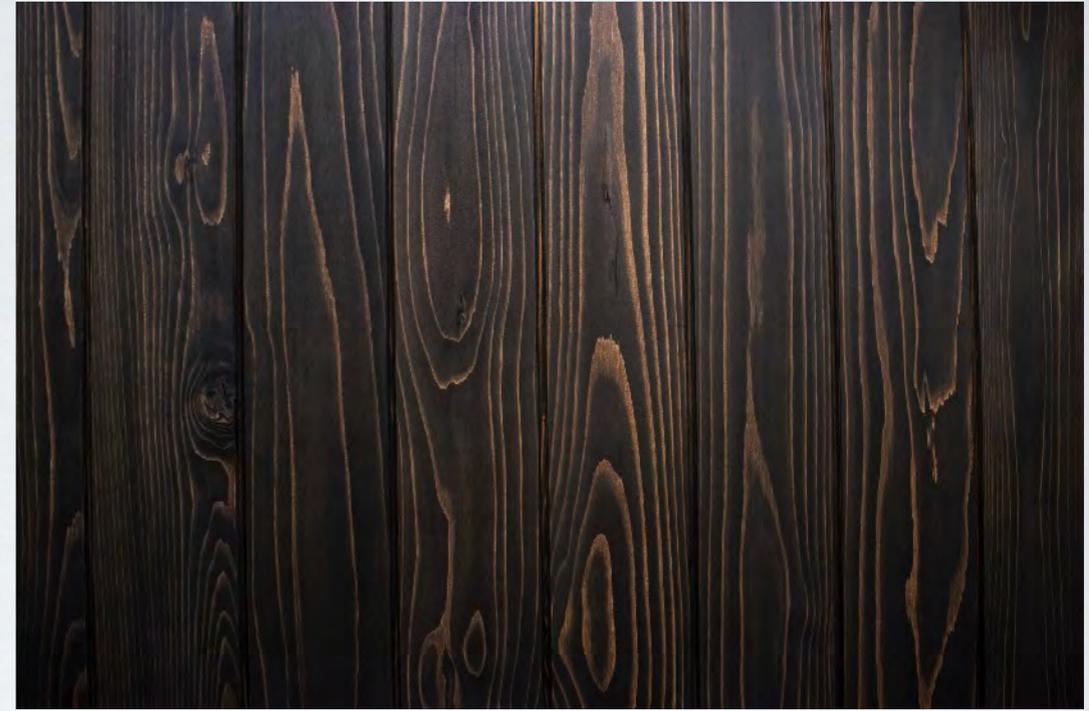


The sculpture is made from wood, riveted core-ten steel, and the restored Sinker Davis mill whistle, reaching approximately 15' in height.

Aesthetically, the materials and fabrication techniques evoke the period in which the mill operated and are built to withstand all weather conditions. The structural aspects of the artwork are meant to last with minimal maintenance since the mechanical aspect of the artwork will require regular upkeep and operation. Due to snow accumulation, the base of the sculpture may need to be steel instead of wood. Alternatively, the entire sculpture could be made from core ten steel.

Inspiration for the sculpture comes from the shape and texture of the iconic incinerator at the mill site. The conical shaped structure was typical of lumber mills and were often to blame for starting the destructive fires.





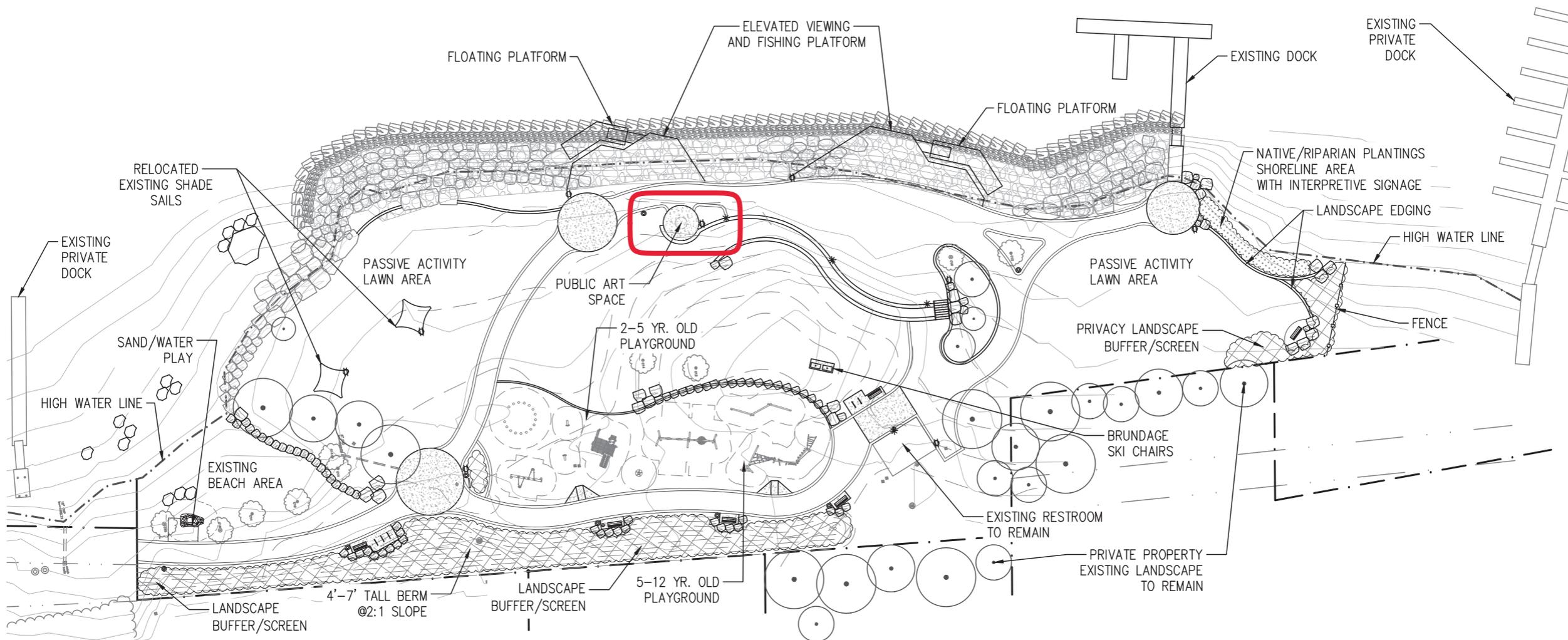
If the sculpture utilizes wood slates, I proposed that they are finished with a wood finishing technique called Shou Sugi Ban or “burnt cypress plank.” This traditional Japanese wood treatment was used for centuries and is now making a contemporary comeback due to its visually striking qualities and its natural preservation abilities.

Shou Sugi Ban preserves the wood for decades. The method entails charring the wood with a torch, sanding off any loose charcoal and sealing with a cedar or linseed oil. The charring method forces the external fibers of the wood to react, carbonizing it, which makes it incredibly durable.

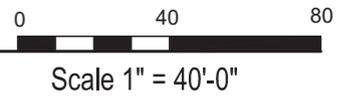
Utilizing this method for the whistle sculpture embodies the history of the mill by recognizing the fact that the mill burned down and was rebuilt many times over. The finish of the sculpture helps tell the story through an old technique made new again.

# Location: Brown Park

Brown Park near the shoreline is the closest site to the actual location of the whistle when the last mill was in operation. I have been working with the design team for Brown Park on the placement of the sculpture. They have done a nice job creating a plaza that will accommodate the public art, provide access for the boiler trailer and work well for public viewing and interaction.



**KRAP NWORB 'LAUTPECNOC'**  
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# Mechanical system and long-term considerations

The whistle can be blown with air or steam. Since steam was originally used and the visual affect is so striking, I have gone forth with my proposal utilizing steam. Steam is incredibly powerful. The engineering of the sculpture, valve, whistle, mechanical systems and long term operation and maintenance of the mechanical system must be taken into consideration when selecting this artwork.

The system to create steam that will blow the whistle is not overly complicated but some equipment is essential. A boiler must be housed in a secure and insulated building or shelter or stored on a portable trailer. The pipe for transporting the steam to the sculpture is underground and must be properly engineered and insulated. The sculpture should be within 50' of the boiler so it does not lose power and condensate on the way to the whistle. Ongoing safety precautions have to be taken each time the whistle is used and proper maintenance must be practiced before putting the whistle and equipment "to sleep" between blows.

This project is a long-term, hands-on art piece that is certain to be cherished by residents and visitors of McCall. In my research it is clear that these whistles, the ones still in use or that have been restored, are treasured. The mill whistle is a special thing. This project would not only be a new signature public artwork for McCall, but would also begin a new town tradition; the whistle sound ushering in a new era from the remains of a past one.