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A paddling we will go ...

Water trails a growing economic driver in the state

By LOUISE WREGE - HP Staff Writer 3 hrs ago



State Rep. Kim LaSata, R-Bainbridge Township, left, and state Sen. John Proos, take part in a paddle Wednesday on part of the Paw Paw River Water Trail. Nine state legislators and other state officials took part in the paddle.

Louise Wrege / HP staff

WATERVLIET — More than 20 state officials and water trail advocates paddled down part of the Paw Paw River on Wednesday from Watervliet to Coloma to draw attention to the economic impact the trails have on local communities.

“Water trails, just like land-based trails, are important recreation corridors, transportation corridors,” Bob Wilson, executive director of Michigan Trails & Greenways Coalition, said before the paddle. “But they also help to drive economic impacts within the community. This is a great model, which is one of the reasons that we’re here today.”

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and Two Rivers Coalition hired contractors and trained volunteers to clear the river of blockages earlier in the summer.

“This is the perfect example of local volunteers and working professionals building a trail that’s accessible by all,” he said.

Wilson said there are 40 designated water trails in the state, but there is no state database of the trails.

“One of the things we need to do is get the Department of Natural Resources more involved in helping to educate people about water trails,” he said. “We want to highlight what we can do at the local level but also talk about what the department can do in the future with the appropriate resources.”

Wilson said it’s important to not only designate water trails, but then to keep them clear.

“When we invite people onto rivers and streams to paddle, we want to make sure it’s safe and accessible,” he said. “When you designate a trail, even at the local level, there are certain assurances that go with that. That’s what these folks are all about – making sure that river is safe and accessible. They won’t designate a river until that criteria is met. And that’s exactly what’s going to happen at the DNR level when we provide them the resources to begin to develop their water trail program.”

At the moment, he said, the state DNR has a plan, but it’s an unfunded mandate.

“One of the things we need to do at some point is either shift existing resources within the department to fund the program or find them some new dollars to actually kick-start the program,” he said.

One of the paddlers was state Sen. John Proos, R-St. Joseph.

“I wanted to draw more attention to my legislative colleagues, particularly on the appropriations side of the equation, when we start talking about how these trails impact the economic vitality of small communities,” he said before the paddle. “There already is a very strong local presence and advocacy for not only the clean up, but the restoration of the river. ... The Natural Resources Trust Fund has been a significant part of that project and other projects that span the entire distance of this trail project.”

Proos said most people think of trails as trails through our woods.

“These are trails that are natural resources that really are huge economic development opportunities for our state, never mind the fact that we have an opportunity to draw together health and wellness activities and events while at the same time recognizing these incredible natural resources that God has already given us,” he said.

He said private entities are already developing the water trails along with volunteer organizations.

“That gives some confidence to the state and me as an appropriations legislator confidence to say, ‘They are already stepping up. How can the state partner to make that a reality,’” he said.

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