

SJ, Bridgman eyed as 'Trail Towns'

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, September 14, 2015 6:00 am

ST. JOSEPH - St. Joseph, referred to as "The Riviera of the Midwest" and "Michigan's Most Romantic City," could have a new designation of "Trail Town" under a recreation and tourism project being launched in the region.

And the city may have company.

Bridgman, too, is being considered in the drive.

Biking and water trail enthusiasts, business leaders and citizens interested in the economic potential of trail-based tourism in St. Joseph can attend a meeting at 6:30 p.m. Monday, Sept. 21, at City Hall, 700 Broad St.

Residents also can participate in formal "Trail Town" and accessibility assessments of key trail amenities around the community Sept. 22. The Bridgman meeting is at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at City Hall, 9765 Maple St.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is participating in the study. More than a dozen communities throughout Michigan already have created formal Trail Town plans and programs. Under the Great Lakes Trail Towns Planning Initiative, St. Joseph and Bridgman are participating along with eight other communities along the Lake Michigan coastline.

Harry Burkholder, director of planning for the Land Information Access Association (LIAA), said the Trail Towns initiative is designed to make communities more aware of the economic opportunities that come from trail-based tourism.

"Trails were once considered to be undesirable and unnecessary infrastructure in most communities," Burkholder said. "People worried that trails would bring crime and unwanted activity into their neighborhoods. However, in reality the opposite happens. Trails not only increase nearby property values, they contribute to sense of place and offer new economic development potential."

Burkholder cited a recent study by the Michigan Department of Transportation that valued the total economic impact of bicycle tourism throughout Michigan at \$668 million annually.



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A pair of kayakers enjoy an evening paddle along the St. Joseph River in St. Joseph in 2012. A meeting will be held at St. Joseph City Hall at 6:30 p.m. Sept. 21 to discuss efforts to promote the area to cyclists and water trail enthusiasts, as well as improving accessibility.

St. Joseph's Trail Town service grant, known as the Great Lakes Trail Towns Planning Initiative, will bring together local officials and trail advocates to identify specific things the community could do to attract trail users.

"There are many small things the community could do through better planning, design and marketing that could make St. Joseph a primary biking and paddling destination for the region and a must-stop for trail users," Burkholder said.

A similar meeting took place earlier this summer in New Buffalo, which is being included in the planning process along with South Haven and Buchanan.

The study also will include Holland, Ludington, Escanaba, Park Township and Ottawa County.

The Lake Michigan Water Trail Plan report, released in 2014, shows that the Southwest section has 84 miles of shoreline extending from New Buffalo to Ottawa County. The shoreline includes 10 miles of parklands, 44 miles of dunes, 47 miles of forests and 32 miles of high bluffs.

The Southwest Lake Michigan water trail connects 24 municipalities, including seven cities, three villages and 14 townships.

The southeast corner of Lake Michigan provides access to four major river systems and one lake: the Galien River (New Buffalo); St. Joseph River (St. Joseph/Benton Harbor); Black River (South Haven), Kalamazoo River (Saugatuck/Douglas); and Lake Macatawa (Holland).

There are established water trails connecting the Galien River Marsh Trail, St. Joseph River, Bangor to South Haven Heritage Water Trail on the Black River, and the Kalamazoo River Heritage Water Trail.

Local officials will work with the state's leading accessibility expert to identify opportunities to provide universal accessibility to local trails and trails amenities.

Developing trailheads, paddling launches and related infrastructure - such as restrooms and parking lots with universal accessibility in mind - helps to improve paddling and recreation opportunities for all ages and abilities.

At the New Buffalo meeting in August, Cindy Burkhour of Access Recreation Group, explained how universally accessible water trail launch sites and trailheads can add to an area's popularity. People with disabilities account for 20 percent of the user population. When families and companions are added to that, the number increases to 30 to 50 percent of the potential user population.

"The initiative will identify specific projects that address accessibility and we anticipate these will be included in local recreation plans and therefore be eligible for grant funding," Burkholder said.

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