

Rotary Launches Water Trail Initiative: The Red Cedar Pathway



Photo by Mikayla Temple

The Red Cedar River is the backdrop for some of the most iconic views on the beautiful Michigan State University (MSU) campus. It's even featured in the first line of the MSU fight song: "On the banks of the Red Cedar..." Yet outside of campus, the Red Cedar River has too often been a forgotten river. Although it flows through numerous parks and recreation areas, this pretty, meandering river, home to an abundance of wildlife, has been an underutilized recreational resource. While it once served as an historic waterway of Chief Okemos, it has been a difficult paddle trip for today's canoe and kayak enthusiasts. But maybe not for long.

Several area Rotary clubs are teaming up to bring recreation back to "The Red." The Williamston Sunrise and Satellite clubs, the Haslett/Okemos club, the East Lansing club, the Lansing club, and the MSU Rotaract club, have formed the Red Cedar Pathway, a regional partnership designed to preserve and protect the Red Cedar River and to develop the Red Cedar River Water Trail into a regional recreational asset for residents and visitors to mid-Michigan.

The Rotary vision is to support a navigable, well cared for, river and water trail running from McCormick Park in Williamston to the Rotary Park on the Grand in downtown Lansing. Along its

route, the river showcases the diversity of mid-Michigan landscapes; from farms and forests in the upstream segment, through suburban areas with an abundance of parks and recreation areas, through the spectacular landscape of Michigan State University, and on to the confluence with the Grand River and the urban experience of downtown Lansing.

The water trail itself will contain a series of canoe and kayak launch sites allowing for varying distances of paddle trips and the opportunity to experience more than a dozen parks and natural areas. Due to the presence of these parks and natural areas and extensive areas of undeveloped lowlands, the entire Red Cedar River is teeming with wildlife and the water trail will offer nature enthusiasts an unrivaled opportunity in mid-Michigan to observe wildlife from an up close vantage point. Paddlers who venture out on the river may be surprised at how natural much of the river is in its upper reaches. One objective is to provide river users with an “Up North” experience in their own backyard, and several stretches of the river do just that.

To achieve their goal and make the river more attractive and usable for river users, the Rotary Clubs have established a series of Adopt-A-River segments focused on specific localized needs, such as enhancing launch sites, removing logjams, and cleaning up trash from the river and riverbank. In addition, the Rotary clubs are installing information kiosks at launch sites and developing online resources to provide information related to the water trail and how to plan a safe paddle trip.

Of course every successful regional project needs good partners and a variety of entities have generously joined the project. Meridian Township originally proposed the concept of a water trail. Williamstown Township, the City of Lansing, and the Ingham County Drain Commissioner removed logjams from the river. The City of Williamston opened a new boat launch. The Ingham County Parks Department is installing wayfinding signage along the riverbank. The Michigan Waterways Stewards and the Lansing Oar and Paddle Club are assisting with the removal of logjams and trash, The MSU Fisheries and Wildlife Club and Outside Club have held river cleanup days, and area Boy Scout Troops have joined the effort and are monitoring the river to identify areas where volunteer work may be needed.

Ultimately, the Rotary clubs plan to partner with the Middle Grand River Organizations of Watersheds (MGROW) to seek formal designation from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources as a state designated water trail.

To showcase the Red Cedar River Water Trail, the Rotary clubs and their partners are planning the first annual River Day Celebration and Red Cedar River Run, which will allow river enthusiasts an opportunity to paddle all or a segment of the Red Cedar River Water Trail. The date for the event is September 30, 2023. This community paddle event will provide an opportunity for the general public to get out on the river and try out the water trail.

With the momentum they are generating, the Rotary clubs are hopeful that it won't be long before canoes, kayaks, and fishing poles become a more common sight in mid-Michigan and

that more residents and visitors will be given an opportunity to experience water-based recreation as they float alongside “the banks of the Red Cedar.”

To become involved with the Red Cedar Pathway, contact John Bollman of the Williamston Satellite Rotary Club at johncarlbollman@gmail.com.