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Groups looking to develop canoe trails in northeast Indiana

By Ellie Bogue of The News-Sentinel
Monday, June 22, 2015 - 9:28 am

A collaboration of several groups is exploring a new recreational outlet for people in the Lake Erie Watershed: the development of canoe/kayak trails.

The trail would allow for better recreational use of rivers and creeks. This means the addition of amenities that will make it user friendly, such as parking and river access. It could include trails along the waterway that would connect the access points so someone could park, paddle and then walk back to get a vehicle or visit a nearby park or eatery.

Several different land preservation organizations already own areas along Cedar Creek. For those, such as Acres Land Trust, the idea of creating canoe trails works with what it already does, which is encourage people to get out and enjoy its nature preserves, said Casey Jones, director of land management.

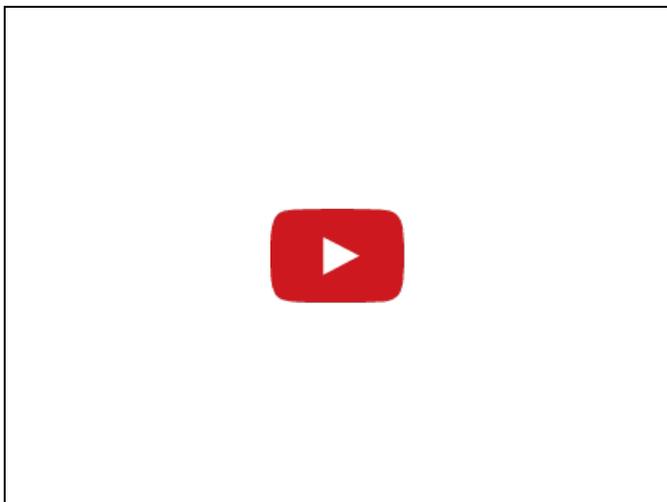
Allen Haynes, of DeKalb County Soil and Water Conservation district, was looking for a better way for their agency to serve the community of DeKalb County. He thought about developing a canoe trail a few years ago but the economy was not great, so the project went to the back burner. With the recession easing, Haynes, along with Kyle Christine Quandt, a board member and a staff person canoed Cedar Creek in the DeKalb area. They also put together a plan for what they would need to develop it into a canoe trail for the community.



More Information

Wonder what it's like to canoe Cedar Creek?

Day campers at Metea Park on the creek in 2014.



Haynes said their board is in favor of the plan, but being a water and conservation district they are concerned more about the conservation part, so they are looking for some other community partners to get involved. Recently they held a meeting with the major stakeholders about the development of the DeKalb County segment of Cedar Creek, along with the DeKalb County Commissioners, the DeKalb County Council and the city of Auburn to see what the support is. So far everyone is excited about the possibilities.

With Quandt, now a grant manager for Northeastern Indiana Regional Coordinating Council, working on Northeast Indiana Blueway Trails, "The two plans dovetail together very well," Haynes said.

Quandt said the Northeast Indiana Blueway Trails started small, just looking at the St. Joseph River, but the project has grown much bigger.

"Canoe trails are becoming more popular all over the nation. People are already out there using the rivers. So making access sites for them that are safe and include an educational aspect, it's just the perfect time, especially with everything else happening here in Fort Wayne." Quandt said.

Quandt said they have put together a planning committee and so far they have had two meetings. People attending the meetings have been from all over the area including the Eel River, the Wabash River, and the Western Lake Erie Basin. The basin includes Fort Wayne's three rivers, Quandt said. Fort Wayne Trails has gotten involved along with the National Park Service, and individuals who use the rivers for recreational purposes.

So far they have done an inventory of most of the rivers. There are 118 established or potential sites. They would like to see a site every 10 river miles.

Shortly after Haynes and his group began working on the plan in Dekalb County, Acres Land Trust of Northeast Indiana acquired a property along the river just south of Auburn, which made him think they needed to include Acres in the conversation. The Blueways group then came into play and Haynes said the potential here seems endless.

They have yet to determine what they would do to develop each access site but are currently working on a plan. They have been looking at what the DNR requires at their sites; signs on river safety and parking, including handicap-accessible and a ramp. Blueway Trails might add to that, but just what they are not sure.

Haynes said besides stabilizing the Cedar Creek banks, the city of Auburn was interested in putting a walking trail along the stream. It could be two projects that evolve together.

With the whole Blueway system, Quandt said they have existing or proposed trails that will connect the walking and water trails together.

"It just makes sense. You could get out of your canoe, hop on the trail and suddenly you can get to a park or you could walk over and get lunch somewhere," Quandt said.

Quandt sees people's perceptions of the rivers as a big hurdle in their project.

"They are brown, and they will always be brown because of the soil here. Even though they are clean," Quandt said.

She believes the answer is to get people out there so they will realize that. Haynes said both the agricultural community and the city of Fort Wayne are using cleaner practices in what goes into area waterways. Haynes said this is an educational piece that people need to know.

"From a conservation standpoint water trails seems like a really good way to combine so many things together to benefit the community. In the end we get this great big thing we can all enjoy, why would we not do that?" Haynes said.

"I think once we actually have something produced, it's going to be huge," Quandt said.

The Northeast Indiana Blueway Trails will develop the western Lake Erie waterbasin first, learn from that experience Quandt said and move onto the next area.