

Rock River Trail Initiative moving forward

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WATERTOWN — Those who hike, bike or paddle might have begun to notice new signs along the Rock River designating river route trails, mapped canoe routes, and scenic driving tours connected with the Rock River Trail Initiative.

The effort, which started several years ago, connects communities all along the Rock River, some 320 miles stretching from south-central Wisconsin to the confluence of the Rock with the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Ill.

The initiative has taken a lot of cooperation between the two states, 11 counties and 37 villages and cities located along the Rock River.

The goal is to establish the Rock River and its communities as recreational and leisure destinations with a national reach through developing, maintaining and promoting a system of recreational trails on and along the Rock River through Wisconsin and Illinois.

To an extent, the sought-after national reputation already has been achieved, as the Rock River Water Trail received national trail designation in 2013, only the tenth water trail to be so recognized. There are now 18.

The reputation of the Rock River as a great destination for hiking, biking, canoeing, kayaking and scenic drives is growing, thanks to these efforts. However, the initiative still is in its adolescence, with more signs going up all of the time and connections being made between existing trails thanks to the cooperation of local government, community backers, individual property owners and donors.

To learn more about this effort, Sustain Jefferson hosted Greg Farnham, coordinator of the Rock River Trail Initiative, on Monday evening at the Watertown campus of Madison Area Technical College.

Farnham, the former commissioner of the Lake Kinnissippi Improvement District, started in 2011 working with the Rock River Trail Initiative, the slogan of which is “Drive it. Hike it. Bike It. Kayak it. Canoe it.”

Farnham said it’s a little like the main idea of the movie “Field of Dreams”: “If you build it, they will come.” Except that in real life, planners know that people have to know about an attraction before they’ll come there.

So an important component of the ongoing effort is promotion of the trail system through signage, maps and partnerships with area governments and organizations.

Planners of the Rock River Trail Initiative wanted to address three main issues, Farnham said.

First, they wanted to make the river trails, on and off the water, accessible to local communities.

Second, they sought to make the river an economic driver, to encourage the spirit of entrepreneurship and to boost business in communities along the river and its associated trails.

Farnham gave the example of the 2 Rivers Bicycle and Outdoor of Watertown and Fort Atkinson as such a business that has grown and thrived, thanks to the river and the other outdoor opportunities nearby.

Third, he said, in developing trails on and along the river, the initiative aims to promote a sense of stewardship, resulting in a cleaner river and the reclamation of adjacent natural areas.

The Rock River Trail Initiative has outlined several goals: to promote ecotourism and recreational opportunities, to advocate for; to protect and preserve Native American culture and heritage along the Rock River; to improve water quality and enhance the ecosystem by supporting and advocating for national recreation, conservation, stewardship and environmental planning and design; and to support the economic development and revitalization of river communities.

“A lot of these communities are experiencing common problems, like downtown decay,” Farnham said. “Their downtowns aren’t what they’d like them to be — and the downtown is where the Rock River flows.

Recreational trails aren’t a panacea for economic problems, but they can be part of the solution,” he said.

The Rock River Trail Initiative has four “legs,” Farnham said, citing the water trails, bicycling routes, hiking routes, and scenic and historic driving routes.

The water trail, on the river itself, is a designated route, marked and mapped, for people to safely paddle with their families.

One of the new Rock River Water Trail signs can be seen at Tivoli Island in Watertown, he said.

The plan for the Rock River Water Trail was completed in 2012. In its entirety, the water trail stretches 320 miles, but it has been split into manageable sections, such as the one from Hustisford to Jefferson.

Planners analyzed each section to designate it for beginners, intermediate or advanced paddlers; noted whether it was urban, rural, or wilderness area such as the part running through the Horicon Marsh, and cataloged access points and GPS coordinates.

About three-quarters of the water trail signs now are up, Farnham said, and the initiative is in the process of installing “Dam Warning” signs all along the Rock River to warn paddlers of upcoming hazards.

The Rock River Water Trail was the first water trail in Wisconsin and Illinois to be designated into the National Water Trails System by the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service.

This happened in early 2013 following President Barack Obama’s call for departments to work together to encourage people, and particularly young people, to get outside and away from the screens that have begun to dominate so many people’s lives.

As mentioned earlier, the Rock River Water Trail became the 10th such designed trail in the United States. There are now 18, and Farnham said he was able to visit some other sites at a recent conference on the National Water Trails in Annapolis, Md.

The National Park Service has been extraordinarily supportive, in terms of providing information and services to the local initiative, Farnham said.

One of the priorities of the Rock River Trail Initiative, as with the national program, is to reach out to people with disabilities as well as to the “future majority” of people of color and urban folks.

The Rock River Water Trail has 155 access sites, he said, of which about 30 percent are handicap accessible (compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.)

“We’d like to increase that as time goes on,” Farnham said.

The associated driving route, the Rock River Trail Scenic and Historic Route, stretches 320 miles from Sunset Marina in Rock Island, Ill., at the confluence with the Mississippi, to two separate trailheads in Wisconsin.

These are Waupun County Park in Waupun and River’s Edge Park in Theresa.

Establishing the driving route required a great deal of work at two state Capitols. Wisconsin’s new statute was signed into law by Governor Scott Walker in 2013. The Illinois General Assembly went through the same process.

“Every turn and every road is in the legislation,” Farnham said. “And we worked with all of the mayors and village presidents along the way.”

Farnham proudly displayed a driving route sign signed by both Gov. Walker and then-Illinois Governor Pat Quinn.

“This will be displayed when we get a final home for the Rock River Trail Initiative,” Farnham said.

The associated bike route, identified with a green sign, does not involve new trails. Rather, the bike route identifies appropriate existing off-road paved or compacted bike trails along with safe and suitable connecting roads and highways that link them.

The continuous, connected bike route measures about 300 miles.

To develop this route, the initiative worked with all of the counties involved to develop road maps, the final alignments for which were approved last year. Cue sheets and GPS maps are available for each of eight sections.

The associated hiking route, identified with a brown sign, also is made up of existing trails along the Rock River. For example, the Ice Age National Scenic Trail crosses the Rock River in Janesville. Canoeists or kayakers could pull their boats up on the riverside, get out and, within 200 feet, be on the celebrated Ice Age Trail, he said.

In the process of bringing this all together, Farnham said, the initiative has worked with lots of different entities along the way. Helping to promote the endeavor have been organizations such as the Jefferson County Economic Development Consortium, local tourism groups and visitors’ bureaus.

Thanks to these promotion efforts, the Rock River in Wisconsin and Illinois is now registered as “River of the Heartland.”

The response from audience members was enthusiastic.

Amy Rinard, a Jefferson County Supervisor from Ixonia whose property lies close to the river, said she thought the initiative had a “great plan.”

The meeting drew three representatives of Greener Oconomowoc and “Oconomowoc-walk and Bike” who were seeking to connect trails in their area to the Watertown area and the Rock River.

In fact, an effort is now under way to build a new Interurban Trail from Oconomowoc to Watertown, connecting existing routes in both cities.

Greg David, a Watertown resident, said the Rock River “shaped his life.” As a child, he played in it and as an adult he has spent more than 1,000 hours paddling it.

He called the initiative “a wonderful effort.”

Ellen Klaus, a Watertown resident who lives close to Tivoli Island, said she has seen more canoeists and kayakers going past her property in the last two years, perhaps due to some of these efforts.

Jill Bedford, another Watertown resident, said the Rock River featured prominently in her early life, as well. She remembered fishing from behind old warehouses, swimming in the river and jumping off a rope into the water, and ice skating on a river backwater in the winter.

“Just today, my mother and I took a drive along one of the designated routes,” Bedford said.

Even though her mother is in the early stages of Alzheimer’s Disease, she really enjoyed the outing, and Bedford said it was wonderful to have such an opportunity so close to home.

Bedford is helping with a watershed plan in Oconomowoc, which should keep the water entering the Rock River cleaner in the future.

Former Johnson Creek Village Administrator Paul Moderacki said that the village wanted to see more of this trail development and tried to encourage trails to be developed along the Rock River when new development occurred.

However, he said, there are still “too many gaps and not enough trails.”

For his part, Farnham commended Sustain Jefferson for its interest, saying, “We need groups like yours up and down the river.”

He said that the funding for the Rock River Trail Initiative comes mainly from private donations. The initiative has received wonderful support from some counties and a lot of in-kind work, such as help from the Jefferson County Parks Department in putting up signs, but the group does not receive major government funding or grants of any kind.

The National Parks Service help comes in the form of consultation, rather than funds.

“It’s a partnership,” he said. “The days of one entity doing it all alone are gone.”

“We are looking at a couple of major initiatives that are in the works, one of them with John Deere,” he said.

More information on the Rock River Trail Initiative and how to support it is available on the initiative’s website at rockrivertrail.com.