

Officials plan 'water trail'



The Bear River is seen looking southward from a pedestrian bridge in Petoskey's Bear River Valley Recreation Area.

RYAN BENTLEY/NEWS-REVIEW

Network would connect along Bear River waterway

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PETOSKEY — An effort among various local entities could lead to an expanded network of recreational amenities, markers and access points along the Bear River over the course of several years.

The waterway runs through Petoskey, Bear Creek Township and Melrose Township, and with participation from decision makers in those governments, the state could designate the course of that river as a recognized "water trail" — "a designated route on a navigable waterway ... designed and managed to create a positive outdoor recreation experience for the user," according to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

Across those three government entities, the designation would mean a more stan-

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standardized framework for future recreational developments along the route, and access to state funds and other resources. For residents and visitors in the area, it might mean an easier time accessing, using and navigating the rapids for river-based water sports and activities.

In a phone interview, Emily Meyerson, a community planning consultant, said she is currently in the process of drafting a plan in accordance with state requirements that would lay the groundwork for the water trail. Bear Creek Township contracted her for that work last year.

"The Bear River is a wonderful, peaceful, accessible resource that is underappreciated, the idea of creating a water trail is to bring the river some love which will in turn improve the watershed," Meyerson said in a followup statement.

Local interest in a water trail sprang, at least partially, from various iterations of the Little Traverse Bay Watershed Protection plan by Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council. The watershed plan, originally completed in 2005, is intended to outline priorities and objectives to safeguard the future of the river. Among the points raised, the plan highlighted the need for better access and public amenities along the watershed.

"The Little Traverse Bay Watershed Protection Plan identified the need to plan for a Water Trail along the largest tributary of Little Traverse Bay because it was a way to reach and educate the public about watershed protection," said water protection director Jennifer Buchanan of the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in a press release earlier this year.

Last year, a newly formed "workgroup" focusing on the creation of a water trail successfully applied for funding from the Petoskey-Harbor Springs Area Community Foundation. That allowed for work in the master plan to begin in fall 2020. The plan is expected to be completed this upcoming fall.

In addition to encouraging recreational development along the Bear River, a draft version of the plan indicates that the effort is intended to spur "multijurisdictional conversation," about protecting the river.

"Having joint goals, strategies and actions between partners will ensure good stewardship of the river for years to come," the plan states.

According to state resources, there are at least a couple of tiers for classifying "water trails." The Department of Natural Resources designated eight official trails in 2019. Separately, the Michigan Great Lakes Water Trails Working Group, which is state-funded and includes volunteers from state departments but is not, in itself, a state department, lists several dozen others on its website, michiganwatertrails.org. A listing for Bear River was added earlier this year following an application from Bear Creek Township.

But a formal water trail plan, with buy-in from all of the jurisdictions, will ultimately be the precipitating factor in realizing the amenity. Meyerson said the plan should be up for approval from policymakers later this year. Some parts of the plan, like the creation of a "Friends of the Bear River" group — to help oversee the management of the river and the water trail — can be implemented shortly thereafter. After that, it may take a couple of years for organizers to complete some of the initial developments specified in the plan.

The draft version of the plan calls for five new "primary" access sites across the length of the river within the first few years of the process. Currently, it isn't possible to project exactly how much it will take to each jurisdiction to develop their access sites, and the cost will likely vary, but the plan asks for each government to budget between \$4,000 and \$5,000 per site. The costs could be offset by grants from the DNR and the Great Lakes Coastal Management program, according to the plan.

Access sites would include amenities such as parking areas, restrooms, wayfinding and educational signs, picnic tables and boat storage.

"With almost 63% of the river bordered by public land, it is astonishing that there are so few developed access points," the plan says.

In the long term, the plan should result in a more cohesive network of recreational resources, make it easier to provide informational and informational material about use of the waterway, and create a unified system of rules for maintaining and using the "trail."