

City of Bangor- Black River Heritage Trail and Boardwalk

1) Project Description and Purpose

a) Site description

The project site follows the Black River within the City of Bangor, Van Buren County. The project begins near Center Street (County Road 681) and ends at Hamilton Street. An attractive aspect of the linear project site is that it is accessible from many residential and commercial areas in the City of Bangor. The project site is a block from M-43, the main thoroughfare from Kalamazoo to South Haven. This recreation project will help Bangor meet its goal to become a “drive-to” destination, instead of a “drive-through” town as it has been for the past several years.

Over the years, the City of Bangor has purchased and acquired property along the Black River. Now with the recent clean-up of the Mill Pond area by the Michigan Department Environmental Quality, the City of Bangor is ready to develop a trail and boardwalk system to connect these properties and make them available and accessible to the public. The public has waited seven years for the clean-up to be completed and is now excited and anxious to see the area open for enjoying the scenic views and peaceful sounds of a beautiful river flowing through the community and for recreational activities such as fishing, bird watching, hiking, canoeing, and kayaking.

The Black River Heritage Trail and Boardwalk project will physically connect the downtown, several residential areas, and the senior center on 2nd Street to the Black River. It will also connect Bangor to South Haven with the Black River Heritage Water Trail for canoeing and kayaking.

Lion’s Park, at the east end of the project area, currently has a picnic shelter, playground, basketball court, foot bridge across the river, foot path on the north side of the Black River, bathrooms, and a parking area. Many fishermen use Lion’s Park, and as a result the stream banks are eroding from the heavy traffic. In 2003, the City installed two parking lots just to the east of Lion’s Park along Railroad Street to serve the proposed recreational activities and the newly renovated Railroad Depot. The City also recently installed a canoe/kayak launch and parking area off of Center Street (the east portion of the project area).

b) Intended use/development of site

The proposed project will include:

- construction of a boardwalk and trail system (the boardwalk will have extended areas for fishing and scenic overlooks);
- installation of 20 signs and markers interpreting the historical and natural significance of the area;
- construction of a skateboard park at Lion’s Park;
- the addition of picnic tables and grills at Lion’s Park;
- the addition of a bike rack at Lion’s Park;
- upgrading the existing bathrooms at Lion’s Park for accessibility;
- the addition of a canoe/kayak launch with a kiosk on the Heritage Water Trail at Lion’s Park; and
- the addition of native plantings for stream bank erosion control and stormwater management (rain gardens)

A signed Downtown Historic Walk on existing sidewalks, passing by the Railroad Depot, Bangor Elevator, and the Freestone Pickle Company, will connect the boardwalk/trail at Lion’s Park to the Center Street/Mill Pond area on the south side of the Black River. Paved shoulders will be added along Main, Bangor and Center Streets to provide the Scenic Mill Pond Walk, which will connect Lion’s Park and

Center Street improvements on the north side of the Black River. The canoe/kayak launch and informational kiosk will establish the eastern end of the Black River Heritage Water Trail. The Heritage Water Trail will end at the Maritime Museum and the Historic Harbor Walk in South Haven.

These improvements will not only complement the existing recreational opportunities currently offered at Lion's Park and Center Street, but will also connect them by creating a linear land and water trail and park system. The proposed improvements will elevate the area's importance as a regional recreational destination for fishing, canoeing, and kayaking. The project not only provides recreational opportunities, but also promotes alternative modes of transportation such as walking, biking, canoeing/kayaking and increases the visibility of the Amtrak train station (the Railroad Depot). The long-term goal of the City is to connect its trail system with the Kal-Haven Trail on the north side of the City.

c) Barrier-free compliance

Most portions of the trail and boardwalk will be handicap accessible. There are a few locations where the boardwalk and trail will not be accessible, but alternatives will be available. The new picnic tables will be barrier-free. The bathrooms at Lion's Park will be upgraded to be fully accessible.

d) Resource protection/recreational opportunities provided by the project

The proposed project will increase recreational opportunities in the area. Increased public access to the Black River is greatly needed. Many fishermen utilize Lion's Park and the Center Street sites. The proposed project will improve fishing and formalize canoe/kayak access to the Black River. The Black River Watershed Management Plan identifies uncontrolled access to the river for fishing as a source of bank erosion and sedimentation. The City of Bangor is identified as a critical area for bank erosion in the Management Plan. The stream bank plantings and the boardwalk with fishing areas will reduce the stream bank erosion and sedimentation of the Black River, resulting in better water quality. This site will serve as a demonstration site for stream bank buffers utilizing native plants for the Black River Watershed Project (see attached letters from Black River Watershed Project and MDEQ). The boardwalk will also make fishing access and walking/hiking easier for handicap and elderly users. The scenic overlooks will provide better access for elderly and handicapped individuals also.

The Black River and the associated wetlands harbor wildlife in the downtown area of Bangor. The number of bird species is especially remarkable; there is even a great blue heron rookery just upstream from the proposed boardwalk at Center Street on city-owned property. The Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy has identified the Black River as an important watershed in its nine-county service area. The river area in Bangor provides essential wildlife habitat and is an opportune place for promoting wildlife related recreation opportunities.

The proposed Bangor/South Haven Water Heritage Trail on the Black River offers many opportunities. The following information is from the Michigan Heritage Water Trail website explaining the educational, ecological, and historical benefits for Michigan provided by heritage water trails:

Michigan Heritage Water Trail signage would signify historic sites of interest. Museum and local community-oriented projects ideally would be placed along water trails and, undeveloped sections of waterways could be used to provide examples of Michigan's natural and geological history. In essence, recreation-based historical education on the rivers could generate greater interest in local history, tourism development and infrastructure, ecosystem protection, and provide information and educational opportunities that would:

- Show how Michigan's population and economy developed by water;
- Appeal to birdwatchers and amateur historians;
- Mesh well with agri-tourism efforts—farms on rivers and lakeshores may charge for parking and put-ins, operate shuttle services, rest stops, picnic areas, and campgrounds;

- Showcase and highlight Michigan's significant ecological values and habitats; and
- Increase awareness of the fragility of Michigan's waterways through responsible use.

The Bangor/South Haven Heritage Water Trail on the Black River already has a website <http://www.vbco.org/watertrail.asp> that is linked to the State's Heritage Water Trail Website (<http://www.wmich.edu/glcms/watertrails/>). The City also has a Microsoft PowerPoint slideshow explaining the benefits of the Bangor/South Haven Water Trail at <http://ci.bangor.mi.us/heritage%20trail%20ppt/Heritage%20Water%20Trail%20Powerpoint.ppt> (see attached letters from Dave Lemburg and Bangor/South Haven Heritage Water Trail Association).

The City of Bangor also promotes other wildlife activities such as bird watching. The City's website contains a photo gallery of birds of the area at <http://ci.bangor.mi.us/birds/Bangor%20is%20for%20the%20Birds.pdf>.

e) Economic benefits of the proposed project

The City of Bangor is a designated "core community" in the State of Michigan. This project will help to revitalize the community by enhancing and connecting the parks and natural areas for Bangor's residents and visitors.

The following information is taken from Michigan's Heritage Water Trail Program website and explains the economic benefits of water heritage trails:

The Michigan Heritage Water Trail Program has tremendous potential for forging a new destination niche and for attracting new tourism dollars to Michigan from both citizens and visitors from abroad. In addition:

- Outdoor recreation and tourism opportunities along heritage water trails would contribute to stronger, more diversified economies;
- Heritage rivers run through many communities that are in urgent need of economic redevelopment;
- Traditional central business districts are often adjacent to the rivers, making them attractive spaces for river oriented business development;
- Opportunities for new private sector development would materialize, including community focused initiatives; and
- Property values and local tax bases along Michigan Heritage Water Trail communities would increase.

The City is hopeful that once the Water Heritage Trail infrastructure is completed, a canoe livery will be established in Bangor. In fact, the attached letter from the Bangor DDA states that an interested businessperson inquired about establishing a canoe livery business in Bangor once he heard about the proposed project. In addition, the land-based trail system will also result in economic benefits to the City. Connecting the river to the downtown area with a signed trail will encourage visitors and park users to explore Bangor's history and visit antique shops and other stores in the downtown area. Several businesses provided letters of support indicating the increased business opportunities that will result from the proposed project.

The Bangor Strategic Economic Development Strategy states the importance of developing the recreational potential of the Black River to bring tourists, jobs and investment to the City. The City believes that private businesses will invest at least \$150,000 and create ten new jobs. These private investments include a café located in the Railroad Depot, a canoe livery operation, and an agri-tourism business in the historic elevator building that will all serve tourists and local residents. Through discussions with other canoe operators in Southwest Michigan, the City determined that the canoe/kayak

opportunities with the Bangor/South Haven Heritage Water Trail would attract at least 1300 people/year from outside of Bangor (see letters from Bangor DDA and Bangor Economic Development Corporation for support).

2) Need for the project

a) Need as documented in the community recreation plan

The City of Bangor completed its “Parks, Recreation, Cultural and Natural Areas Master Plan” in 2002. The City is committed to providing quality recreation and cultural opportunities to its residents. The Recreation Plan contains the proposed project and indicates the project as a priority for the community. The prioritization of projects was created with significant citizen input through surveys and community meetings.

The community survey asked which park activities residents enjoyed the most. As the result of this survey, the proposed project will provide and enhance the following recreational activities:

- Relaxing (ranked #1)
- Walking/running (ranked #2)
- Picnicking (ranked #3)
- Fishing (ranked #5)
- Bicycling (ranked #6)
- Rollerblading/Skateboarding (ranked #13)

The City’s visioning session held during the development of the Recreation Plan ranked the boardwalk/trail system as the third highest priority. The number one and two ranked activities were development of a community calendar and better communication and marketing. The community’s long-term goal is to connect the Bangor trail system to the Kal-Haven trail.

b) Applicant’s existing system

The City of Bangor owns and maintains nine recreational facilities (five mini-parks, two neighborhood parks, two community parks and zero regional parks). The City funds its parks with general funds. The schools and community organizations provide recreational planning while utilizing the City’s facilities.

c) Need for the project in relationship to existing facilities

The proposed project will provide a linear park following the Black River and will attract residents from other communities. The project connects and improves existing recreational sites creating a walkable trail/boardwalk system in the City. This newly formed linear park will become the City’s first regional park (see further discussion on page 6, “Justification for increased service area”). The recreational opportunities being proposed in this project fulfill Bangor’s desire to develop the riverfront area for recreational use while protecting and improving the natural features along the river.

The linear park will have active and passive recreational opportunities that will suite all ages. The senior citizen housing is located just to the north of Lion’s Park. These seniors will enjoy the peaceful setting for walking, fishing, relaxing and enjoying nature. Families with children will enjoy picnicking, hiking, biking, fishing, and canoeing. The canoeing, kayaking, and cultural experience of the Historical Walk and Water Trail will attract tourists and enthusiasts of all ages.

Of special interest to the youth in Bangor and surrounding communities is the skate park. Several youth in Bangor have been working with the city manager to design a skateboard park for Lion’s Park. The youth researched other skate parks in person and on the Internet to design a facility that they would enjoy. The City is looking forward to providing a safe place for this popular activity.

3) Past grant performance

The City of Bangor has never received a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) grant. However, the City has received other grants such as a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), funds from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) funds, Land and Water Conservation funds (awarded in 1986), and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funds. The City of Bangor has successfully implemented all of these grant projects.

4) Additional information and special initiatives of the MNRTF board

The proposed project meets the special initiative of the MNRTF board to develop trailways that contribute to the overall state trail system. The City of Bangor has been very active in the newly formed Southwest Michigan Alliance for Recreational Trails (SMART). The mission of this group, led by the Southwestern Michigan Commission, is to partner, promote and connect a planned trailway system in southwest Michigan and adjoining areas to enhance the quality of life for all. The group is working in partnership with MDOT to map existing trails and bike routes.

The City of Bangor is working with Van Buren County to connect its trail system to the Kal-Haven trail, which runs north of the City by paving wide shoulders on County Road 681 (Center Street).

Increased Service Area Justification (refers to question 15 on page 2 of 8)

The proposed project will serve more than just the City of Bangor. Van Buren County and the surrounding townships either do not provide, or provide very limited, recreational opportunities to the residents. The City of Bangor is a major recreational provider for Bangor Township, Arlington Township, Geneva Township, and Columbia Township. None of these surrounding townships offer a Heritage Water Trail, a skate park, or a walking trail that combines the experience of both a historic downtown and a water body (the Black River). The City of Bangor recognized this service area in its Recreation Plan and provided population statistics for these municipalities. The wide range of activities (skateboarding, walking, and canoeing with a historical interpretation) being provided by the proposed project will attract youth, families, and elderly citizens.

The proposed Black River Heritage Water Trail will begin in Bangor and end in South Haven. A community group, The Bangor/South Haven Heritage Water Trail Association, is spearheading the water trail. The mission of the Association is to protect and preserve the scenic beauty and heritage of the Black River between Bangor and South Haven for the enjoyment of all. The Heritage Water Trail will serve as a niche recreation destination, attracting residents of both the City and the Township of South Haven who will use this water trail as a connector between the two cities. As well, the City of Bangor anticipates attracting people from Kalamazoo and surrounding metropolitan areas who drive through Bangor on the way to South Haven. The City proposes adding signs along M-43 that will advertise the new Heritage Water Trail opportunity in Bangor. According to MDOT traffic counts, the annual average daily traffic count on M-43 for 2003 through Bangor is approximately 7,000 vehicles per day; however, in the summer months, traffic counts are as high as 14,000 vehicles per day. Since Bangor is only a 40-minute drive from Kalamazoo many people will drive that distance, and even further, to canoe or kayak on the Black River Heritage Water Trail from Bangor to South Haven.