

OUR VIEWS

Designations will help buoy cities along Rock River

Lately, sightseers have been streaming toward the Rock River for all the wrong reasons. They've come to witness another massive flood, one approaching the record spillover of 2008.

Make no mistake about it, however; the water will recede and recreational opportunities will return. We're talking about boaters and anglers, canoeists and kayakers.

The Rock River stretches from its headwaters near the Horicon Marsh in Fond du Lac County down to Rock Island, Ill. It attracts those types of outdoor enthusiasts and more. That's what makes designation of this 320-mile waterway as a National Water Trails System significant. That recognition should help lure more tourists from across the country, and tourism is vital to Wisconsin's economy. They'll come not only to ply the river's waters but to drive and bicycle and camp and hike and watch birds and enjoy other wildlife that the river naturally attracts.

Couple that with state legislation designating the Rock River Trail Scenic & Historic Route, and good things are bubbling to the surface of this now-raging river.

Like many worthwhile endeavors, national recognition rose through a grass-roots effort. As columnist Anna Marie Lux detailed in Sunday's Gazette, Frank Schier once paddled 235 miles and drove along the Rock's shores to collect stories with the idea of writing a book. He later bought a Rockford, Ill., newspaper and renamed it The Rock River Times. That put his book idea on the back burner. He did, however, call a meeting of officials and river enthusiasts in 2010 to push national water trail designation.

That spawned the Rock River Trail Initiative, and officials and supporters from communities up and down the river meet regularly. The initiative achieved its top goal last month of putting the Rock on the national map as a recreational destination. Detailed maps break the river into sections and include access points and ratings of paddling difficulties.

The initiative now hopes to create parallel systems of land routes for hikers, bikers and motorists. It also wants to boost the water quality by creating monitoring stations and shoreline buffers to reduce toxic runoff.

State Sen. Tim Cullen, D-Janesville, was lead author of the state legislation, one of those rare birds that stirred enthusiasm on both sides of the aisle. Senate Bill 41 directs the Department of Transportation to designate and mark the scenic and historic route, which would highlight points of interest such as natural areas, historic sites and local attractions. No state money will be used for signs. Instead, the trail initiative will raise private funds and apply for grants.

"The Wisconsin constitution's Public Trust Doctrine states that all navigable waters are forever free and are owned by the people," Cullen noted in a Gazette column April 3. "That is the spirit of the Rock River Trail Initiative: creating more public use, appreciation of and respect for the Rock River. Our area can benefit from promoting all that the Rock River has to offer."

Tourists won't flock to the river overnight, of course. We should expect, however, that these national and state designations will build enthusiasm and interest over time. That will ring cash registers at restaurants and gas stations, hotels and sporting goods shops and at other businesses along one of the Midwest's longest waterways. That will buoy the economy in Janesville and the 36 other cities and villages along the river.

