

## Beloit section of Rock River Water Trail officially open

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It was a year in the making, but the job isn't done yet.

Several people gathered Wednesday evening at the John Rose Canoe and Kayak Launch in downtown Beloit to officially open the Beloit section of the Rock River Water Trail.

The trail stretches the entire 320 miles of the Rock River from Wisconsin through Illinois until it reaches the Mississippi River.

Greg Farnham, coordinator for the Rock River Trail Initiative, began the process of making the river into a national recognized water trail by the National Park Services over a year ago.

During the ceremony, Farnham said Beloit sits almost directly in the middle of the Rock River Water Trail, with about 160 miles to the north and south. Farnham said the idea of a water trail came from Frank Schier, founder of the Rock River Trail Initiative and publisher of the Rock River Times.

Last July, Farnham met with Sheila DeForest, Beloit city council member, and expressed his idea of getting both Wisconsin and Illinois together and draft a proposal to the National Park Services for official designation of the Rock River as a water trail.

Farnham said working to get the designation can bring the two states together.

“Many times where rivers can divide communities, this river can be a unifier,” he said.

Sen. Tim Cullen, D-Janesville, echoed Farnham’s remarks and said he remembers as a kid coming to Riverside Park and watching the boats on Sunday afternoons.

“I’ve really been on this river since I was born,” he said.

Cullen said the Wisconsin constitution states the waters belong to the people and not the land owners who surround it.

“I think with this initiative more people will come and be on the river just like I did,” he said.

Scheir, who said he's canoed 235 miles of the river, spoke about the undeveloped parts of the river.

He said there are places where you can stop on the river, look out and feel like you have stepped back in time 200 years.

Scheir said the trail recognizes beauty right here in Wisconsin.

“The greatest treasures are all in our backyards,” he said. “And that's what this river is.”

Sheila DeForest, who also serves on the Rock River Trails Initiative Council, said the application was submitted to both Illinois' and Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources about two weeks ago.

“We hope to hear something in about six months,” she said.

DeForest said working to get the application together was a “very laborious effort.”

Part of the work required the council to survey every dam and boat access in the Rock County.

The initiative inventoried everything from disability access to needed improvements to make the access points more user friendly.

The next step is to submit the application to the U.S. National Park Service. If accepted by the department, then the communities could be eligible for grants to improve the portages on the river.

Bottom line is the designation will help keep the river accessible to everyone, which DeForest says is most important.

According to the National Park Service website, the Secretary of the Interior or Secretary of Agriculture can designate recreational trails as national trails.