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Gateways to the Arkansas

Coalition wants more Kansans to be able to enjoy river's beauty

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The Wichita Eagle

Kansans may finally get to much more easily experience something they've owned since statehood -- the Arkansas River. A coalition of small and large towns, counties, a conservation group and a state agency has plans for creating more than a dozen new river access points in south-central Kansas.

Amid the approximately 120 miles of river within the plan are long stretches of flowing water with no signs of civilization, pristine sandbars perfect for picnicking or playing, and enough wildlife to keep anglers and birders busy for hours on end.

The plan is big news for a state that annually ranks at or near the bottom in the amount of public lands.

"We're trying to open up the river through this entire region," said Larry Hoetmer of the Wichita Park and Recreation Department. "It's an asset we've always had that's never been utilized because people couldn't get to it. There are so many opportunities out there for recreation."

The Arkansas River is one of Kansas' three navigable streams, and the entire length of the riverbed is public property. However, the majority of the river is lined by private land.

The needed permission to cross privately owned ground has been difficult to obtain for generations.

About two years ago, 10 interested governments and conservation groups formed the Arkansas River Corridor Access Plan.

The plan's goal is to offer public access about every 5 miles from the Reno-Rice county line northwest of Hutchinson to near Oxford on the Sumner-Cowley county line.

Broad-based appeal

Some access points would be on land already owned by a city or county. Others would be purchased or leased from landowners.

Plans call for two kinds of access points. Some will have a small parking lot and boat ramp. Others may have restrooms, playgrounds, picnic areas and camping facilities.

"A lot of people might think it's just a canoeist thing, but the river has a lot more to offer," said Ben Huie of the Arkansas River Coalition, a conservation group that routinely leads floats down the river.

"We also want to provide places where people can just walk down, put out a lawn chair and enjoy watching nature along the river and a sunset. They don't even have to get on the river to enjoy it."

Similar plans are in progress on Kansas' other two navigable streams -- the Kansas and Missouri rivers.

Mike Hayden, the state's secretary of Wildlife and Parks, said the section of the Missouri River that separates northeast Kansas from Missouri has plenty of access points that are mainly used by fishermen.

From Manhattan to Kansas City, the Kansas River has about 10 access points, and several more are planned for this year.

As the river coalition hopes will happen on the Arkansas, the Kansas is getting use from a variety of outdoor lovers.

"It's pretty impressive," Hayden said. "We especially have a lot of birders floating. During the summer, from Lecompton to Lawrence, they can float by some bald eagle nests and see the birds. It's a very nice float."

Quick implementation

There are already two primitive access sites on the Arkansas River in Rice County. Oxford is refurbishing an access area in a city park.

Wichita has access sites at Garvey Park, 3501 S. Washington, and at 71st Street South.

Hoetmer, of the Wichita Park and Recreation Department, said the Wichita sites are used often.

Robert Spoon, Oxford city superintendent, said the town's access site, the only one within miles, draws people from great distances.

Funded with money from plan members, a Eudora consulting firm is evaluating sites for future access points.

Tom Huntzinger of Applied Ecological Services said his firm is looking at such things as river flows, bank stability and the potential for hiking and wildlife watching.

Patti Banks Associates, a Kansas City, Mo., consulting firm, will hold public meetings on the plan over the next two months.

Huntzinger expects to have his findings complete by the end of May.

Construction could start this summer, though no final financial figure is known.

Ken McCloskey, district fisheries biologist for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, said each site would probably be funded and maintained by a local group or government.

He also predicted there would be private and government grant money available.

Landowner concerns

Some people have concerns about the project.

Steve Swaffer, Kansas Farm Bureau director of natural resources, said landowners bordering the Arkansas have worries about trespassers and vandalism.

"You always have the minority of folks who can't obey the laws," Swaffer said. "Personally, I think it'll be important that things be patrolled and property lines well marked."

He has special concerns about the latter since the definition of what's public -- between high-water marks -- along navigable streams is vague.

Most involved think such problems can be overcome and that the project will benefit more than just those who use the river.

Oxford has already invested nearly \$40,000 in its site, Spoon said, and he sees it as money well-spent.

"It's only about four blocks from our downtown," Spoon said. "We'd love for people to float down and walk in, do some shopping or maybe buy lunch. Hopefully they'll like what they see enough to come back in a car sometime."

Others see the project as money and time wisely invested in protecting the Arkansas.

"The river always needs people who care," Huie said. "It's one thing to zip over it on the Kellogg flyway at 60 mph and another to be actually on it. That's when you fall in love with it. I've done that for years and the river's something I sure want to protect."

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