

The Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Master Plan is an innovation that is forward thinking, widely embraced, far-reaching, and will have impacts for decades. I believe it is worthy of the honored distinction of the DuPont-Pioneer innovationLeader of the Year Award.

Des Moines was founded as a city because of its location at the confluence of two major rivers. For thousands of years, these waterways have been sources of food and sustenance, transportation and energy, respite and beauty. But the past 50 years have seen us more disconnected from the water than ever. Where would you go to touch the water? Despite riverwalks, numerous parks that border creeks and rivers, and an extension trail system, the Greater Des Moines region lacks access to get down to the water to fish, paddle and play. Our primary relationship with our streams is one of concern over poor water quality and threat of floods. It is not a place of recreation and joyful experience.

But over the past 18 months, the people of Greater Des Moines have been invited to reimagine their rivertown roots – and what the region might look like to once again embrace its rivers for all their potential.

In cooperation with several community partners, the Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) completed the Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Plan which envisions an abundant network of water recreation for 150 miles of the region's creeks and rivers, including places for tubing, birding, hiking, paddling, boating, and fishing, the establishment of area greenways, floodplain protection and improved habitat. The plan covers the Des Moines, Raccoon, South Skunk, North and Middle rivers, as well as Beaver, Fourmile, Mud and Walnut creeks. When implemented, the recommendations outlined in the plan will bring about transformational change – reconnecting thousands of people with the rivers as a keystone natural resource.

Recommendations through Community Input and Stakeholder Discussions Identified in the Plan:

- Activating the Des Moines River in downtown Des Moines through dam mitigation, shoreline improvements, fishing nodes, tube and boat rentals, bird viewing areas and other amenities;
- Improve access for anglers, paddlers, tubers, birders and families;
- Branding three regional parks along Raccoon and Des Moines rivers by connecting network of existing parks;
- Greenway development through protection of the 100 year floodplain;
- Expanded programming, events and businesses along and in the river and creeks;
- Significant restoration of river and creek shoreline restoration and numerous quarries;
- Encouragement of improved water quality and flood mitigation efforts;
- Regional coordination across government entities and user groups;
- Economic development nodes;
- Additional soft trails and paved trail connections;

- Historic preservation and interpretation;
- Expansion of multi-modal options for river engagement; and,
- Create family-friendly amenities along creeks and rivers.

We couldn't have imagined 20-30 years ago what long-term impact the paved trail system would have on our region. With 150 miles of streams, there are abundant places to offer tubing, fishing, paddling, respite, stone skipping and mucking around. The Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Plan, when implemented, will reimagine and reconnect us with our river roots.

The Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Plan is innovative for several reasons.

1. Originality of the innovation. The regional nature of this innovation is what gets it points for originality with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. While the DNR has worked with other communities on other water trails plans for single segments of rivers, this is the first time since the state water trails plan was launched that a plan was developed for an entire region, envisioning an interconnected network of water trails.

2. Impact of innovation. The impacts of this innovation are many:

Quality of life will improve with more outdoor recreation opportunities.

Economic development will benefit from improved recreational amenities.

Public health will improve with more outdoor recreation.

Water quality, as an issue, will gain champions as more people interact directly with waterways.

3. Commercial impact of innovation. The commercial impacts of this innovation are notable, as well, including:

Tourism will benefit from new attractions.

Workforce recruitment will be supported by the addition of water recreation.

4. Developing a culture of innovation. Through the process of developing this plan, the MPO helped cultivate a culture of innovation among the elected officials, staff members, and volunteer board members of the cities and counties throughout Greater Des Moines. As the plan was developed, more and more people got excited about the potential of the plan. People went from "What are water trails?" to "When can we start developing them?"

The plan was adopted on November 17, 2016, at which time the MPO, on behalf of the region, will transition to regional coordination of implementation of projects listed in the vision document.