



Lower Grand River

Water Trails

Lower Grand River Water Trail  
Planning for Kent and Ionia Counties

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# Introduction

The Grand River is Michigan's longest river, flowing 262 miles through seven counties in Michigan's Lower Peninsula, to its river mouth at Lake Michigan.

Its major tributaries include the Red Cedar, Looking Glass, Maple, Flat, Thornapple, and Rogue Rivers. The watershed encompasses 5,572 square miles and drains portions of Hillsdale, Jackson, Ingham, Shiawassee, Clinton, Eaton, Gratiot, Montcalm, Mecosta, Ionia, Barry, Kent, Newaygo, Muskegon, and Ottawa Counties. As a Lake Michigan connecting waterway, it is the blue thread that ties together Michigan's natural resources and opportunities for recreation and economic development; it also provides a sense of place. It is divided into three major subwatersheds, the Upper Grand River, the Middle Grand River, and the Lower Grand River.

In 2016, the Upper Grand River Watershed Alliance (UGRWA), the Middle Grand River Organization of Watersheds (MGROW), and the Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds (LGROW) formed the Grand River Partnership (GRP). One of the primary goals of the GRP is planning and implementation of a headwaters-to-Lake Michigan Grand River Water Trail. The Middle Grand River and the Lower Grand River in Ottawa County were designated Heritage Water Trails in 2014 and 2012, respectively, and the Middle Grand River and the Upper Grand River were designated state water trails by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in December 2018. West Michigan Environmental Action Council (WMEAC) has provided support and research for the water trail planning efforts, primarily in the Lower Grand River Watershed.



# Lower Grand River Water Trail Planning

The Lower Grand River originates below the Looking Glass River confluence, near the City of Portland; flowing to the northwest through Grand Rapids, Michigan's second-largest city; to its terminus at Lake Michigan. In addition to the regional efforts to designate the entire length of the Grand River as a water trail, the City of Grand Rapids is poised to restore its namesake rapids to the Grand where the river flows through the city's downtown. This provides a unique opportunity for WMEAC to support the planning, improvement, and development of a Lower Grand River water trail system in Ottawa, Kent, and Ionia Counties.

Water trail development in each of these counties is at very different stages. As alluded to above, Ottawa County Parks and Recreation Commission launched the Grand River Heritage Water Trail in 2012.

This water trail has 18 access points – three of which include seasonal universally accessible launches, and it highlights 60 cultural and historical features along the trail. In Kent and Ionia counties, there is less water trail infrastructure. Kent County Parks highlights water trails on their webpage, providing a static map of launches and portages. Grand Rapids Parks completed strategic planning in 2017, and there are ongoing discussions around formation of a Grand River water trail within the City, as a complement to the rapids restoration project. Although Ionia County has done a lot of work on implementing rails-to-trails for hiking and biking, it has not had as much focus on water trails to date.

Recreational amenities, including trails, have served as important catalysts in providing opportunities for safe and enjoyable outdoor recreation in Michigan. West Michigan's regional passion for place-making,

natural resource protection, and regional connectivity can now be directed toward establishing the State of Michigan's premier Blue Ribbon water trail on the longest and greatest river in Michigan, the Grand. The number of Americans that participate in outdoor recreational activities (49%) is growing rapidly. In 2012, kayakers accounted for 30% of participants, with canoe paddlers making up another 15%. Kayaking is rated among the top 10 activities drawing the most first-time participants; it is one of the fastest growing nature-based outdoor activities in the United States, with an estimated 12.5 million participants, representing a 63% increase from 2000 to 2007 (*Cordell, 2008*). This increase in participation has direct economic, recreational, health, conservation stewardship, and educational benefits to communities that have access to water trails.

In 2016, WMEAC completed the Lower Grand River Water Assessment and Improvement Plan: Grand River Heritage Water Trail – Ottawa County, which includes nine recommendations for water trail infrastructure, amenity, safety, and marketing improvements. Although specific to the water trail segments in Ottawa County, this plan provides guidance for the planning and development of water trails along the rest of the Lower Grand River, further upstream in Kent and Ionia Counties, including within the City of Grand Rapids. In 2017-2019, WMEAC completed a similar assessment of the water trail assets and amenities for the Grand River in Kent and Ionia Counties. This report summarizes the results and will be utilized by LGROW to complete a Lower Grand River Water Trail Management Plan that will support applications for state – and possibly national – designation of the entire Lower Grand River as a water trail.

# The Benefits of a Water Trail

A water trail is a designated route on a navigable waterway such as a river, lake, or canal that is designed, implemented, and managed to foster educational and recreational experiences for the user. Water trails are intended for non-motorized vehicles such as kayaks, canoes, and other human-powered crafts in order to promote a "quiet water" recreational experience along the trail. A water trail offers many benefits to surrounding communities and can offer new experiences to people wishing to get outdoors and enjoy Michigan's pristine environment. A variety of recreational, economic, conservation, and cultural development can arise from the implementation and community support of a water trail.

Water trails can influence the economic activity of the communities that they run through. Outdoor recreation itself is a billion-dollar industry, with water sports contributing over \$85 billion in spending per year and creating and supporting over 800,000 jobs in the United States (*The Outdoor Recreation Economy, 2012*).

The North Forest Canoe Trail Economic Impact Study in New England was released in 2006 about a survey of over 1,000 paddlers on one of the most well-known water trails in the country. A component of this study examined the average expenditures of paddlers per

day and how these expenditures supported local economies. The median paddler typically spent about \$215 per trip, with non-local paddlers spending \$46 per person, per day; the majority of these expenditures occurred in communities that were connected, or close to, the water trail (*Pollock, 2007*). Additionally, 12% of paddlers utilized a paddle guide service, thus supporting businesses in adjacent towns. The economic impacts included support for over 280 jobs in rural communities and already-existing markets; however, this economic activity did not create new markets for service providers catering to paddlers (*Edmonds, 2011*).

Studies have shown that water trails have the ability to improve the economic health of small communities, and that an increase in paddle sports tourism supports local business and positively impacts local lodging, transportation, campgrounds, restaurants, retail, and entertainment industries (Warren, 2015). An Economic Impact Study done on the Huron River revealed that that water trail contributed to an overall \$50 million in economic impact to its communities over a two-year time period. This water trail in Southeast Michigan was able to support an estimated 103,000 paddlers and benefit 26 municipalities in both rural and urban communities (*Isely et al., 2017*). This study provides an example of how



Michigan has used, and can continue to use, the water trails program for economic purposes when local communities invest in river recreation (Warren, 2015).

Economic inequality between urban and rural communities continues to be a growing issue in the United States. More economic development and attention is given to growing urban communities, leaving local businesses in rural communities to struggle. When a rural community builds on its natural amenities, including access to rivers, tourism increases and brings economic development to these rural communities that suffer from income disparity. Increasing access to rivers diversifies rural economies, and is a method to bridge the gap between rural and urban communities and gradually improve quality of life for residents of lower income, rural communities (Marcouiller et al., 2004).

Communities that receive economic benefits from the water trail also play a large role in conservation of the natural amenities connected to the river. In order to keep the river pristine for paddlers and attract new paddle sports enthusiasts who will spend money at local businesses, community leaders focus their attention on community-wide initiatives to keep the waterways clean such as river cleanups. Sustained growth in popularity of a water trail correlates with a higher percentage of conservation efforts carried out in communities that are connected with the water trail (Hill et al., 2009).

Maintaining involvement in recreational opportunities can garner a commitment to conservation and help people adopt environmentally responsible behaviors that keep rivers and watersheds clean. Providing recreational opportunities for individuals who do not already have access to have these experiences supports the eco-tourism industry, helps direct attention to conservation efforts benefiting threatened environments (Lee, 2011). The North Forest Canoe Trail Study found that having available and accessible recreational opportunities can increase environmental awareness, including water quality issues and ecosystem problems in the natural environment. When visitors see conservation and environmental issues firsthand through an enjoyable experience, they begin to care more about prevalent issues and show a desire to learn about how they can get involved in future conservation efforts.

According to Michigan State University Extension, a water trail can mobilize those who wish to have a recreational experience. It also increases visibility of local bodies of water and what environmental issues are most prevalent to local and non-local paddlers (Bohling, 2012). When a water trail becomes an established part of the community, it is easier to engage the residents in working toward conservation. Providing recreational experiences, no matter what the activities may be, can provide opportunities that protect open space, specifically bringing attention to biodiversity threats, watershed pollution, flood management, and litter control (Moore and Ross, 1998).



# Educational Opportunities

The spread of invasive species remains a growing concern as water trails become a more popular recreational activity, as paddlers can unknowingly bring along aquatic invaders through improper boat management strategies when leaving or entering a water trail. Common aquatic invasive species, such as zebra mussels and water chestnut, can have detrimental effects on Michigan's natural and economic systems. Surveys conducted on New York rivers in 2012 revealed that 15% of all boats had some sort of aquatic invader on them when they left the water, and that only 56% of recreational boaters saw this as a serious problem (Sharp et al., 2017).

Studies have shown that aquatic invasive species are not a high priority concern to the public unless they directly threaten popular natural areas, economics, or human health (Sharp et al., 2017). The public's apathetic view on the spread of invasive species is a result of a lack of education that every invasive species has an indirect effect on recreation, and that every paddler can take part in preventing the spread of these species. The Michigan Water Trails Manual urges that water trail managers, watershed organizations and concerned citizens promote invasive species awareness with public educational programming, informational sessions for paddlers on how to hose their boats and drain their hulls, promotional signage, and informational materials that bring attention to the dangers of invasive species to the water trails (LIAA, 2017).

Amenities can be used along the water trail to give people background and information on areas of conservation concern for the river. Many water trails across the United States utilize signage to attract paddlers to natural features along the water trail that needs preservation including adjacent wetlands, water



quality, state forests, and more. Allowing paddlers to learn about natural features that would normally go unnoticed brings attention to natural areas that need support (Johnson, 2002).

Water trails can provide educational opportunities for paddlers interested in historical and cultural components along the trail. Cultural components to a water trail add unique attractions that offer distinct experiences for paddlers to enjoy. Cultural components can have a theme that is unique to the community and draw in larger groups of paddlers with these interests (LIAA, 2015).

A single designated water trail can have as little or as many cultural or historical attractions as the water trail managers want. The Grand River Heritage Water Trail in Ottawa County highlights 27 cultural or historical attractions that range from county parks that have historical significance or sites of old companies that played a role in cultural development in the county. The Lamont Button Factory, Ottawa Boom Company, and other inviting points of interest can offer educational opportunities for paddlers and their friends and families.

# Water Trail Designation

In Michigan, there is a hierarchy of water trail designations, each with varying criteria and a distinctive application processes. The lowest level designation recognized by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the Local Water Trail Designation, followed by the State Water Trails Program. Next, is the National Water Trails System that is managed by the National Parks Service; and finally, the highest designation is classified as a Pure Michigan Water Trail.

## LOCAL WATER TRAILS

A Local Water Trail is a developing water trail that has some infrastructure, is known by the community, and has not yet gone through the application process to become a State Water Trail. Local Water Trails typically have some organization or community group maintaining and supporting the water trail for a certain stretch of the river. There are no criteria or application processes to becoming a Local Water Trail, rather it only needs to be navigable and periodically maintained. There is no funding for Local Water Trails in Michigan; therefore, there are generally no interactive maps created to identify access points or amenities. The static map of the 42 Local Water Trails that are recognized by the DNR can be found at [Michiganwatertrails.org](http://Michiganwatertrails.org).



## STATE WATER TRAILS

The State Water Trails program is supported by the DNR. The DNR wanted a water trails program that was completely unique to Michigan, where users could find accurate and up-to-date information on water trails within the State, rather than wait for the National Water Trails information to be updated. It acts as a statewide clearinghouse to streamline information from the DNR about conditions of trails and relevant information to Michigan paddlers. One goal for implementing the State Water Trail program in Michigan is to provide a model with clear standards for all Michigan Water Trails.

The application process is modeled after the National Water Trail application, but is less detailed and less difficult for applicants to earn a State Water Trail designation for a river. The applicants are scored on whether the proposed water trail provides an enjoyable experience; offers clear information for water trail users; has broad community support; and has an appropriate water trail plan that addresses safety, stewardship, education, historic resources, marketing strategies, future management, and development.

Currently, there is no state funding for the State Water Trails program, so there is no way to provide money towards improved signage, bathrooms, accessibility, etc. However, in fiscal year 2020, the Michigan State Waterways Commission was tasked with developing a plan for funding water trails.

According to the DNR Water Trails website there are currently eight designated State Water Trails in Michigan, including the Upper and Middle Grand River. There are over 500 miles of water trails in Michigan, and that number will soon be growing as more rivers go through the application process.

## **NATIONAL WATER TRAILS**

The National Water Trails program was the initial water trails program that inspired the other designation programs. Twenty one rivers are recognized as National Water Trails, with two in Michigan – the Huron River and the Island Loop in St. Clair County. At this point, the future of the National Water Trails program is unclear. There is currently a backlog of more than a year and a half on responses to applications, and the National Park Service has not been able to prioritize funding and resources for this program.

## **PURE MICHIGAN WATER TRAILS**

Pure Michigan Water Trails represent the highest designation according to the DNR. Pure Michigan Water Trails replaced the previous designation – Heritage Water Trails – that was adopted in 2002. Nine water trails were classified as Heritage Water Trails before the program was reorganized and renamed in 2016. However, these Heritage Water Trails were not automatically designated as Pure Michigan Water Trails. To become a Pure Michigan Water Trail, a river must

first be recognized as a State Water Trail. The water trail should be a model water trail, and locally known as a safe and enjoyable experience. A committee of DNR officials, Pure Michigan staff, and economists meet to decide on which applications deserve designation. The committee considers community engagement, water quality, current infrastructure, and amenities of the State Water trail when reviewing an application for Pure Michigan Water Trail designation. Water trails that have earned the title of a Pure Michigan Water Trail will be able to get a license for the designation and will be eligible for funding for signage that recognizes them as a Pure Michigan Water Trail.

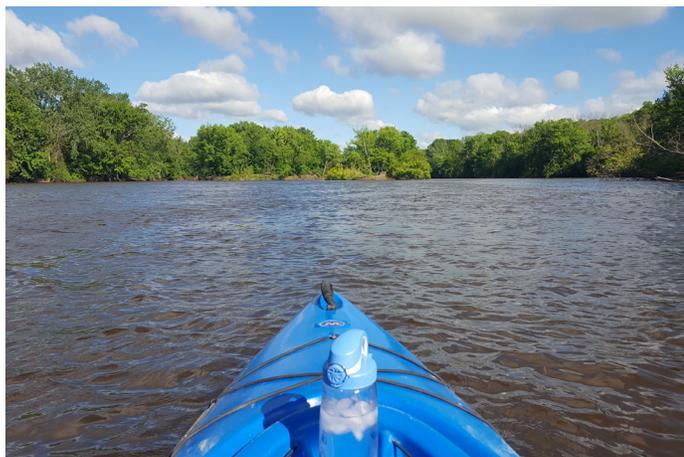


# Funding Opportunities

Because there is currently no designated state funding for the water trail programming, it is up to the water trail managing organization and its partners to apply for funding through grant and sponsorship programs. General categories of support include planning, maintenance, promotion, and safety projects along the water trail (LIAA 2017).

## **MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, GREAT LAKES, AND ENERGY (EGLE)**

The Michigan Coastal Management Program in partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), provides grant funds to assist in the development of vibrant and resilient coastal communities through the protection and restoration of sensitive coastal resources and biologically diverse ecosystems. This includes low-cost construction of water trails, barrier-free canoe/kayak launches, parking lots, interpretive signage, and other amenities that improve access to the Great Lakes. The Coastal Management Program also funds the development of water trail master plans and development studies. Coastal jurisdictions, certain regional agencies, universities, tribal governments, and non-profit organizations are eligible to apply. Grant amounts must be no less than \$10,000 and no greater than \$200,000 and require a 1:1 match from the applicant. Local match can be in the form of cash, in-kind services, and other grant funds from non-federal sources.



## **MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION**

The Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) is a competitive grant program that funds projects such as multi-use paths, streetscapes, and historic preservation of transportation facilities that enhance Michigan's intermodal transportation system and provide safe alternative transportation options. The Michigan Department of Transportation and Southeast Michigan Council of Governments each have access to federal transportation funds to support place-based economic development by offering transportation choices, promoting walkability, and improving quality of life. A minimum 20 percent local match is required for proposed projects and applications are accepted on an ongoing basis online. This could potentially be used for certain times of water trails funding.

## **MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES**

The DNR has a number of funding programs that could be used for water trail planning, development, or implementation:

1. The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund derives contributions from royalties on the sale and lease of State-owned mineral rights. These funds are then granted back to qualifying agencies to acquire and develop lands for public recreation, or for protection of land for its environmental importance or scenic beauty. A minimum 25 percent local match is required in addition to an updated 5-Year Parks and Recreation Master Plan. Grant applications are due April 1st each year.
2. The DNR also oversees funds from the sale of the Recreation Passport, which replaced the resident Motor Vehicle Permit for state park entrance. A portion of the

revenues are then granted back to qualifying agencies for development projects. The program is focused on renovating and improving existing parks, but the development of new parks is eligible.

3. The National Park Service distributes funds to the DNR's Land and Water Conservation Fund to fund outdoor recreation facility development. In recent years, the focus of these grants has been on trails, community outdoor recreation, green technology in outdoor recreation, universal access, or coordination and cooperation among recreation providers. A 50 percent match is required and grant requests must be between \$30,000-\$100,000. In addition, the community must have an updated 5-Year parks and Recreation Plan on file with the DNR.

4. The DNR's Forestry, Invasive Species, and Aquatic Habitat Grant Program provides funding for local partners and agencies for community-based forestry projects, invasive species removal, and aquatic protection activities.

### **NATIONAL PARKS SERVICE**

The Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program draws on a large network of conservation and recreation planning professionals to assist local communities with recreational projects. Applications for assistance are competitively evaluated on how well the application aligns with program criteria. RTCA doesn't provide funding for water trails management or operations, but it does provide support in the form of resources and expertise.

### **OUTDOOR FOUNDATION**

The Outdoor Foundation is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 foundation established by the Outdoor Industry Association. Outdoor Nation is a national initiative of the Outdoor Foundation that offers some grant opportunities, including its Paddle Nation Project, which awards grants up to \$2,500 to 501(c)3 non-profit organizations and colleges/universities to help connect young Americans with their waterways through recreational paddling.

### **MICHIGAN QUIET WATER SOCIETY**

The Michigan Quiet Water Society (QWS) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that works to educate the public and encourage participation in non-motorized outdoor recreation; promote public concern for the water resources of the Great Lakes region; support environmental stewardship and conservation of natural resources; and plan and execute annual and special events for any or all of these purposes, including the annual Quiet Adventures Symposium (formerly, Quiet Water Symposium). QWS has awarded small grants to non-profit and civic organizations and clubs for projects that have included water trail development, accessibility assessments, paddling events and habitat improvement.

### **LOCAL RESOURCES**

Local municipal financing tools, like Tax Increment Financing (TIF), can also potentially be utilized to fund water trail improvements, especially in urban areas. In addition, tax credits are available to small businesses that make accessibility improvements that better serve customers with disabilities. Funding may also be secured from local and regional Community Foundations, regional trail and recreation advocacy organizations, friend groups, and local conservation groups, depending on their funding priorities. Municipal staff members, Downtown Development Authority staff members, interested volunteers, or even a professional grant writer can be especially helpful in researching and writing grants on behalf of a local water trail initiative. Building relationships and partnerships with local businesses is also critical in securing funding for your water trail initiative. Local businesses (especially restaurants, breweries, outfitters and hotels/resorts) may be willing to sponsor special trail related events and activities. Furthermore, local businesses may be willing to take on the cost of providing and building trail amenities and support services. The more that local leaders can involve a wide variety of interest groups, stakeholders, and individuals in the water trail planning effort, the more likely it will be to secure funding from these different sources.

# Community Engagement & Support Opportunities

In 2017-2018, WMEAC gave numerous presentations in Kent and Ionia Counties to promote the Lower Grand River Water Trail and gain local support. Audiences were primarily local government officials and planning committees, but professionals and members of the general public were also included. These presentations provided an overview of what a water trail is, clarified what the Lower Grand River Water Trail project is about, and how cities and townships can support the project. Presentations touched on topics such as the recreational, economic, and cultural benefits of water trail implementation in Kent and Ionia counties. The presentations were modified to provide residents and city officials with relevant information to their municipality including access points in their area, economic benefits for their area, and more. A summary list of presentations can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1. Grand River Water Trail Update Presentations and Displays.**

Date	Location	Event/Venue
10/25/17	Grand Rapids	Presentation to Women Lawyers Association of Michigan Fall Meeting
3/3/18	East Lansing	Joint Display at Quiet Water Symposium
3/12/18	Walker	Presentation to City Commission
3/20/18	Lowell	Presentation to Lowell Township Council
3/22/18	Sunfield	Presentation to Danby Township Council
3/28/18	Portland	Presentation to Portland Township Council
4/2/18	Lowell	Presentation to Lowell City Council
4/11/18	Saranac	Presentation to Boston Township Council
4/12/18	Ada	Presentation to Ada Township Parks, Recreation & Land Preservation Board
4/19/18	Ada	Presentation at Rivers Update event at Roselle Park
4/25/18	Grandville	Presentation to Grandville City Council
5/2/18	Grand Rapids	Meeting with City of Grand Rapids Parks & Recreation Director
5/9/18	Belmont	Presentation to Plainfield Township Council
5/11/18	Grand Rapids	'Shed Talk at LGROW Spring Forum
6/11/18	Ada	Presentation to Ada Township Council
8/20/18	Portland	Presentation to Portland City Council

## RESOLUTIONS OF SUPPORT

All riverside municipalities who received a presentation were given a draft Resolution of Support for the Lower Grand River Water Trail to either have approved or disapproved by their municipal boards. Approved Resolutions of Support have been returned by Ionia County, the Village of Saranac, the City of Walker, Lowell Charter Township, the City of Lowell, Boston Township, the City of Grandville, Plainfield Charter Township, and Ada Township, and the City of Portland.

## COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

Feedback about the project was given by the cities and townships after these presentations. Most of the feedback was positive; however, negative feedback regarding tubers was brought up frequently. Members of the community were concerned about the negative behavior associated with tubers. Public intoxication, loud gatherings, and disrespect to other water trail users were often cited as something that needed to be addressed before moving forward with Water Trail designation.

Community education could address this problem, with resources on how to responsibly use the water trail. This type of behavior change will result in more respectful and enjoyable environments. Information about personal environmental safety when using the rivers should be included and will emphasize how to respect other recreationists, property owners, and the environment by following the river rules and regulations. Signage along the water trails outlining "River Rules" has been suggested by many involved parties and should be implemented.

# Infrastructure and Water Trail Assets

The application for state designation of the Lower Grand River Water Trail requires a Water Trail Management Plan. The basis of this plan is an assessment of existing water trail planning efforts, tourism and resources, and access sites. WMEAC has accumulated this information for both Kent and Ionia Counties to better understand how the Lower Grand River Water Trail fits into regional recreational and planning goals.

### RECREATION PLANS

Although water trails have been discussed at the national and state levels for more than a decade, local municipalities are still learning how to build in development and maintenance into their long-term planning efforts. We're beginning to see the initial planning for water trail infrastructure in Kent County communities, but Ionia County recreation planning is still not widespread. Table 2 summarizes the extent of recreation planning and water trail planning in Kent and Ionia Counties.

**Table 2. Recreation Plans and the Intersection with the Lower Grand River Water Trails Development Planning in Kent and Ionia Counties.**

Community	Country	Recreation Plan	Grand River	Water Trails
Ada Township	Kent	Yes	Goals to protect areas as parks along the Grand River	Water Trail implementation in progress
Berlin Township	Ionia	No	-	-
Boston Township	Ionia	No	-	-
Danby Township	Ionia	No	-	-
City of Grand Rapids	Kent	Yes	Large focus on Grand River	Water Trails not specifically mentioned, but does plans for more river access and signage
City of Grandville	Kent	Yes	Grand River included in plan	Water Trails not mentioned
City of Ionia	Ionia	No	-	-
Ionia County	Ionia	Yes	Grand River not specifically mentioned, but plans for more boat launches and parks	Water Trails not mentioned
Kent County	Kent	Yes	Yes	Water Trails not mentioned
City of Lowell	Kent	Yes	Goals to increase access and park rehabilitation along the Grand River	Water Trail plans included added signage and mile markers
Plainfield Township	Kent	Yes	Goals to increase parkland along Grand River	Water Trail plans to find low impact access points with limited parking
City of Portland	Ionia	Yes	Goals to increase festivals, fishing, and access to Grand River	Water Trails not mentioned
Portland Township	Ionia	No	-	-
Village of Sanarac	Ionia	Yes	Goals to increase fishing and kayaking on Grand River	Water Trails not mentioned
City of Walker	Kent	New Master Plan in Process	Very little mention of Grand River	Water Trails not mentioned

## TOURISM

An important consideration for implementing a water trail on the Grand River through Kent and Ionia Counties is the number of local tourism resources that cities and townships have near the water trail that can support the local economy. Tourism businesses attract water trail users to stop in the locations along the Grand River and act as an economic incentive for cities and townships to promote the Grand River Water Trail. All types of tourism resources should be considered, documenting local hotels, campgrounds, attractions, festivals, rental services, and diverse food options. A table of the tourism options located in and near the cities and townships along the Grand River Water Trail is located in Appendix A.

## WATER TRAIL ACCESS POINTS

Access points are locations along the river for the public to connect with the water trail and begin their paddling experience. Access points can take many different forms, with some points simply being a boat launch or ramp for paddlers to quickly access the Lower Grand River Water Trail, while others serve as parks where friends and family can spend the day before or after enjoying the water trail experience. It is important to take an inventory of current and potential infrastructure at each access point. Important infrastructure that influences the quality of a water trail access point includes available restrooms, proper signage, safe boat ramps and launches, and environmental concerns such as erosion and litter. Each access point is unique and offers its own set of opportunities for the community to have an enjoyable experience on the Lower Grand River Water Trail.

Some access points are directly along the Grand River, while others are nearby on connecting tributaries that offer easy access to the Grand River. These sites were assessed as they are commonly used to access the Lower Grand River Water Trail. Kent County has 24 total water trail access points. Five of these access points are owned and managed by the Kent County Parks Department, while 16 are owned and managed by other government entities such as cities, townships, and the Michigan DNR; 3 access points had no listed

owner/operator. Twelve of the total access points are located directly on the Grand River, and 12 on tributaries. See Figure 1 and Table 3.

In Ionia County, there are 14 access points that connect to the Grand River Water Trail. Of these, 2 are connected to public parks, and 9 are smaller boat ramps or dams connected to the water trail. Finding ownership information about access points located in Ionia County was more difficult than in either Kent or Ottawa Counties. The Ionia County Parks Recreation Department does not have the information published online, nor do they have information readily available when contacting their office

**Table 3. Ownership of Inventoried Access Sites in Kent County**

Access Point Name	Site Ownership	Connecting River
Fallasburg Park	Kent County Parks	Flat River
Lowell Flat River Boat Launch	City of Lowell	Flat River
Lowell Grand River Boat Ramp	City of Lowell	Grand River
Grand River Riverfront Park Access	Lowell Township	Grand River
Fulton Street Boat Ramp	Michigan DNR	Grand River
Upper Ada Dam River Access	Ada Township	Thornapple River
Lower Ada Dam River Access	Ada Township	Thornapple River
Cascade Park River	Cascade Township	Thornapple River
Ruehs Park	Kent County Parks	Thornapple River
84th Street Dam Boat Launch	Unknown	Thornapple River
Coldwater River Park	Kent County Parks	Coldwater River
Chief Hazy Cloud Park	Kent County Parks	Grand River
Knapp Street Boat Ramp	Michigan DNR	Grand River
West River Drive Boat Ramp	Michigan DNR	Grand River
Rockford Boat Ramp	City of Rockford	Rogue River
Summit Avenue River Access	Unknown	Rogue River
Friske Drive River Access	Unknown	Rogue River
Grange Road River Access	Michigan DNR	Rogue River
Riverside Park - North	City of Grand Rapids	Grand River
Riverside Park - White Pine Trail	City of Grand Rapids	Grand River
Riverside Park - South	City of Grand Rapids	Grand River
Front Avenue Boat Launch	City of Grand Rapids	Grand River
Johnson Park - Veterans Boat Launch	Kent County Parks	Grand River
Indian Mounds Drive Boat Ramp	Michigan DNR	Grand River

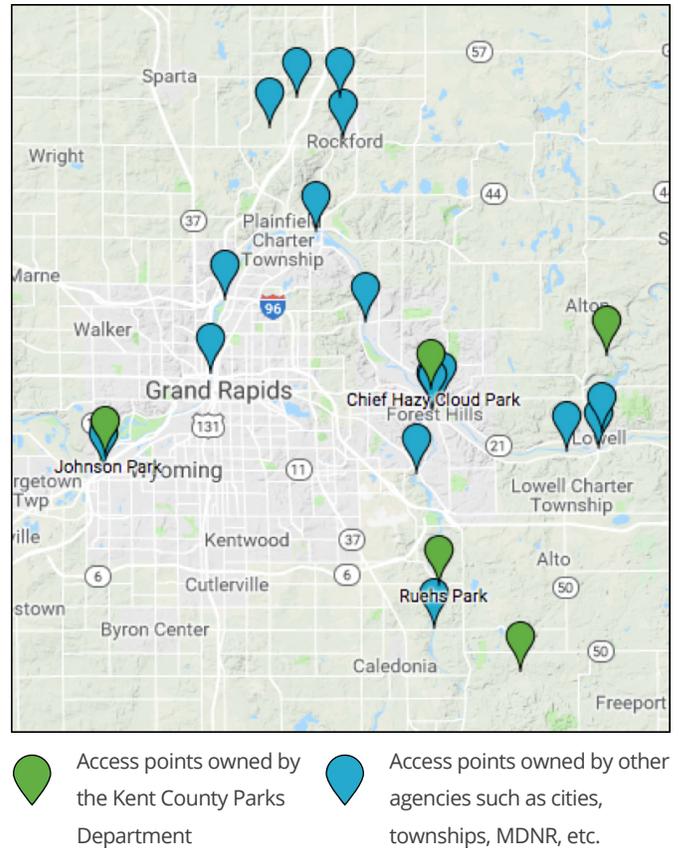
## ACCESS POINTS INVENTORY

WMEAC surveyed Grand River access points in Kent and Ionia Counties between Fall 2017 and Spring 2019, using the Water Trails Asset Record Form developed during the previous inventory of access points along the Grand River in Ottawa County in 2015-2016. Data were collected on site location information, a detailed inventory of available amenities, any structural issues, and environmental and conservation concerns (see Appendix B). Safety is an important consideration when surveying an access point. It is important that potential hazards to access points are identified and addressed before an accident occurs. Access points should be a safe distance from roads to avoid potential motor vehicle accidents. Water Trail access points should be accessible by everyone and be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); however, many access points along the Grand River lacked the proper infrastructure to ensure accessibility to all members of the community. After the surveying was complete, recommendations were made on how the access point could be improved to ensure safety and enjoyment for water trail users.

Overall, Kent County access points had minimal environmental concerns such as soil erosion, invasive species, or poor river access. Only 7 of the 23 parks include recommendations pertaining to poor river access that can be addressed and improved upon. Almost half of the access points, 13 out of 23, had concerns regarding pollution as there was either litter scattered around the access point or poorly placed waste disposal bins near the banks of the river. In many cases, these waste bins ran a risk of tipping over and depositing their contents into the river. In Ionia County, access points were in fairly good condition with minimal environmental concerns associated with riverbank erosion, invasive species, and pollution concerns. Even the cases of pollution or riverbank erosion were minor in comparison to the Kent County assessments done in 2017-2018. These can be addressed with waste disposal containers at access points, and/or potential volunteer cleanup events.

The biggest concern with the access points in Ionia County

Figure 1. Access Points to the Grand River in Kent County.



was the lack of information available. The Ionia County Parks and Recreation Department has no information published about the location and conditions of water trail access points. Even the addresses or directions available are not detailed enough or do not lead to the right location when entered in Google Maps. On the trip to complete assessments in March of 2019, two sites, Muir Ramp and Wager Dam were unable to be found, with the directions leading to dead end roads far away from the river, forested areas, or private property. This can be incredibly frustrating for people who would like to use the water trail as users get lost or detoured while trying to access the water trail.

### Sites that need easier river access:

1. Charlotte Highway Boat Launch (Ionia) – This site is not very developed; there is a steep slope that is slowly being eroded.
2. Friske Dr. River Access (Kent) – This access site is on a small strip of land by a roadway. It does not have a shoulder for parking and the ramp is a very short and steep wooden structure.

3. Grange Road River Access (Kent) – The dirt road to the access point is eroding, leaving large hills and divots in the path. The path often floods, and the bank is almost made entirely of a large root system, which can be easily tripped on. The water level is too high which makes it difficult for large groups of water trail users to access the river. This site must be redone.

4. Johnson Park (Kent) – This access point has high soil erosion due to the loss of the riparian buffer strip along the river. This could create unsafe river access conditions if left unchecked.

5. Lower Ada Dam River Access (Kent) – The access area is located down a steep, winding path. A railing should be considered for added safety.

6. Lyons Ramp Boat Launch (Ionia) – This is a developed access point, but it does have a pretty steep slope that could be a hazard.

7. Portland Dam and Fish Ladder (Ionia) – This site presents a potential hazard as the Dam does not have a barrier.

8. Portland State Game Area (Ionia) – This site has a very steep slope that is being eroded. There are roots and loose soil that could be a tripping hazard. This launch is only suitable for hand-carry kayaks due to limited space.

9. Ruehs Park (Kent) – The park website suggests that there is easy access for all canoers and kayakers, but after inspecting the site, it does not appear to be so. The site lacks a ramp or launch, and depending on the water level, it can be incredibly difficult to get into the river.

10. Summit Ave River Access (Kent) – This site is on an undeveloped strip of land near a roadway. It lacks a launch point and has at least a foot drop from the access point to the river. The access point is rocky and could present a hazard.

#### **Sites that have pollution concerns:**

1. Charlotte Highway Boat Launch (Ionia) – There are no waste or recycling bins, which could lead to litter in the river.

2. Friske Drive (Kent) – There are no waste or recycling bins.

3. Grange Road (Kent) – There are no waste or recycling bins.

4. Indian Mound Drive (Kent) – There are no waste or recycling bins.

5. Johnson Park (Kent) – Litter scattered around the park

and in the river.

6. Knapp Street Boat Ramp (Kent) – Litter is scattered around the park due to lack of disposal bins.

7. Lowell Flat River (Kent) – This site is located near an industrial area that has potential for air and water pollution.

8. Lyons Ramp Boat Launch (Ionia) – There were concerns about corrosive metals at this access point.

9. Portland Dam and Fish Ladder (Ionia) – There are no waste or recycling bins

10. Portland State Game Area (Ionia) – There are no waste or recycling bins at this access point.

11. Riverside Park South Access (Kent) – There are no waste disposal facilities during off-season months.

12. Ruehs Park (Kent) – Waste bins are 3 feet from the river and could cause litter pollution if it fell over or overflowed.

13. Summit Avenue (Kent) – There are no waste or recycling bins.

14. Weber Dam Ramp (Ionia) – There are no waste or recycling bins.

15. West River Drive Boat Ramp (Kent) – There are no waste or recycling bins.

#### **Sites that should not be considered an access point:**

1. Muir Ramp (Ionia) – The given location led to a private road near someone's backyard. It was close to the river, but it was obviously private property that is not meant for water trail access. After looking around in the immediate area, there were no other sites that looked like they could be the Muir Ramp access point.

2. Upper Ada Dam River Access (Kent) – This site is located on a very narrow piece of land on a very busy road. There is no room for parking on the shoulder, and there is no parking lot nearby. There is no potential for expansion for parking as there is a railway nearby. A major power plant is located not far from the access point, and there are signs warning people of the danger of high voltage. This does not make water trail users feel safe at this site and should be reconsidered as an access point.

3. Wager Dam (Ionia) – This location was down a small private road in a forested area. There was a gate that was closed, and no river access could be found.

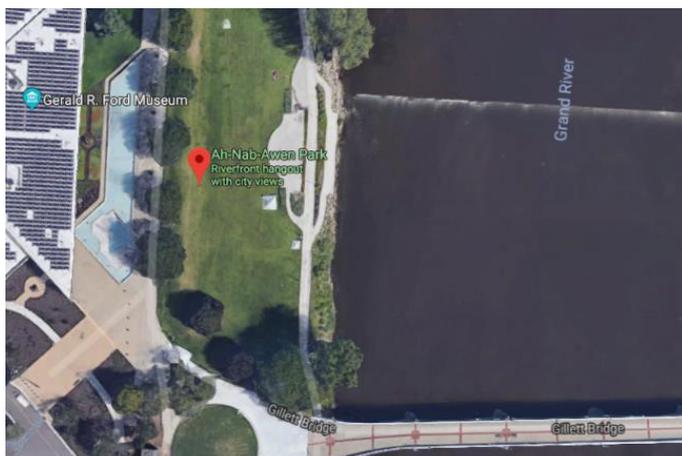
# Proposed New Access Sites

As the Lower Grand River Water Trail becomes easier to navigate and more well known in the local communities and state, development will have to be considered to accommodate increased usage and easier accessibility. Adding access points along the Lower Grand River Water Trail will help with reaching more people and attracting them to the water trail. Proposed access points were identified on Google Maps, based on their proximity to interested townships and public spaces – such as parks – that could be used as a public space for water trail users. Proposed access points were also considered based on current infrastructure that could be used for an access point, or the ability to easily install infrastructure and create an access point.

## PROPOSED ACCESS POINT #1: AH-NAB-AWEN PARK (KENT)

An appealing access point, Ah-Nab-Awen Park in downtown Grand Rapids would be suitable once the rapids restoration project is completed. There are restrooms and parking in this area that could accommodate large numbers of people. This could be an effective access point because it is located in the central part of the city and could attract people from around the downtown area. (See, Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Aerial view of Ah-Nab-Awen Park



## PROPOSED ACCESS POINT #2: JUPITER BOATHOUSE (KENT)

This access point is a boathouse in Plainfield Township (Figure 3). It is located right off Jupiter Avenue NE (Latitude: 43.062705, Longitude: -85.610360). It is unclear if this site is public or not, but it does have a boat ramp and ample parking available. If it is public, it should be considered for an access point. If it is privately owned, there should be discussions with the property owner about making it a public launch point.

Figure 3. Aerial view of Jupiter Boathouse site.





# Access Site Amenities

The available amenities at an access point along the water trail can shape the experience for water trail users and encourage a diverse group of people with varying skillsets to explore the water trail. Certain amenities can ensure that the water trail is universally accessible to all ability levels of users and will welcome new paddlers to adopt the hobby. Amenities can work to complement each other and accommodate large groups of people who seek to enjoy time with family and friends at access points before entering the water trail. Amenities vary based on the size and usage of the access point, with larger and some heavily-trafficked access points having amenities such as restrooms, sheltered areas, potable water, picnic spaces, and parking lots; less trafficked access points may have only a ramp or boat launch, waste disposal, and a smaller area for gear preparation. The Michigan Water Trails Manual offers not guidance on what amenities should be present at access point, other than that they should remain consistent with the size and surrounding environment of the access point.

Amenities such as signage to help water trail users navigate their experience and relay river rules to users, emergency phones for emergency situations, potable water to ensure hydration, and ADA accessible infrastructure, however, should be encouraged at all access points and can help create a universal and safe experience for all. See Table 4 for a summary of amenities at the Lower Grand River access sites.

## EMERGENCY PHONES

Emergency phones are necessary for the safety and well-being of water trail users. In the case of an emergency, it is likely that someone has fallen or flipped overboard, which is likely to result in a wet and damaged cellular device. Having emergency phones at these access points, along with signage on the river to inform users of the distance between each emergency phone and access point, could help reduce the issues in an emergency.

## SIGNAGE

One of the largest challenges for some access sites is not being able to find them, in large part due to a lack of signage. Some access sites could only be found using their specific latitude and longitude coordinates. Having access site signs along with road, near the entrances, and on the river bank, would allow water trail users to find the access sites from the land, as well as from the river. Adding water safety information, historic/cultural information, wildlife information, maps, and river rules to the signs around the access sites would provide water users with the information they would need to have a safe and informed trip. Specific steps needed for signage in Kent and Ionia Counties include:

1. Implementation of river and water trail access signs along the roads leading up to the location, as well as on-site, possibly near the driveway or parking area.
2. Placement of signs near access site that include information about water safety, contact information, river rules, emergency contact, site number, and mapping.
3. Placement of signs along river bank or in the river for paddlers and water trail users to inform them about their location and other information about the area that they are in. These might include areas that are historic, scenic/natural, or hazardous.

## RESTROOMS

It is important to provide water trail users with restrooms along their trip route.

## ADA ACCESSIBLE SITES AND LAUNCHES

It is crucial that this water trail development is inclusive to all people, with an understanding of necessary facilities at each access point. Having ADA Accessible access points will invite people of all abilities to try the water trail and encourage people new to the activity to explore it.

## POTABLE WATER

Safe, drinkable water is a necessity to each access site. Water must be provided and accessible for all, especially since these are areas of recreation. Potable water can be installed at access points and be close enough to the river so that water trail users can quickly access the water.

## PARKING

Although parking was found at almost all access sites, there were some areas for improvement. Parking is important for water trail users who want to spend the day on the trail and not worry about their vehicle on the shoulders of a road.

## BOAT STORAGE

There were no boat storage amenities present at any of the river access points surveys. Providing boat storage where paddlers and river users can safely secure their river crafts would be a benefit to all access sites. The boat storage amenities would be especially important where food and lodging amenities are present.

## PICNIC AREA AND SHELTER

Providing these types of amenities will encourage more people to use these access point facilities. By providing a picnic area and shelter, people could enjoy meals and be protected from weather circumstances within the shelter. Shelters can also be used for emergency situations or when getting to safety during a storm.

## WASTE DISPOSAL AND RECYCLING

Waste disposal and recycling bins are essential to keeping access points, the areas surrounding them, and the rivers clean from litter and debris. Recycling bins and education on recycling should be a focus for water trail implementation. Waste disposal and recycling bins should also be kept away from the river. Overflowing bins, or accidental tipping of bins, can result in litter being spilled into the river. Waste bins should be moved far away enough from the river to mitigate these accidents, but not too far that they discourage people from stopping at an access point to use them.

**Table 4. Consolidate summary of amenities at Lower Grand River water trail access points in Kent and Ionia Counties.**

Amenity	#
ADA Access to River	19
Boat Rentals Nearby	0
Boat Storage	1
Camping Facilities	1
Eateries or Food Options Nearby	11
Emergency Phone	1
Event Venues Nearby	3
Handicap Parking	13
Indoor Lodging Nearby	5
Launch Fees	0
Lighting	11
Parking Lot	26
Picnic Area	19
Potable Water	5
Power	4
Restrooms	20
Shelter	12
Signage	4
Trailer Parking	18
Transportation	5
Waste Disposal	21
WiFi	0

## LOWER GRAND RIVER AMENITY RECOMMENDATIONS

After surveying the access points in Kent County, there are clear improvements that can be made to current amenities to make water trail access points more user friendly, inviting and safe. The most common and significant issues with amenities at access points within Kent County were failure to have ADA Accessible infrastructure, improper signage along the river and near the road, a lack of emergency phones for the public and limited space for large numbers of people and vehicles to gather and prepare for their water trail experience. Additionally, only 4 sites had potable water. These can all be focus areas that can improve

Kent County access points. With some access points having such long distances between them, it would be fitting to have all of these amenities at Kent County access points.

Many of the locations in Kent County did, in fact, have restrooms and picnic areas for water trail users to utilize before, after or during their water trail experience. Of the 24 access points surveyed, only 9 did not have restroom facilities and 10 did not have a picnic area for people to take a short break or enjoy a meal away from the water. Many of the locations without these amenities are simply too low traffic or small to justify the installation of these amenities. Generally, these locations are relatively small and cannot yet accommodate implementation of restrooms and designated picnic areas due to lack of available space or funding.

Ionia County has a lot of potential areas of amenity improvement. Many access points in the county are not developed or have infrastructure for amenity implementation. Many sites were difficult to find; although many of the sites had signage, most of them were not visible from the road, nor did they have sufficient information for paddlers. Many of them only had a very basic map of the access point and lacked contact information for emergencies. Signage in Ionia County can be improved upon by adding more information to supplement questions that paddlers may have such as the distance to the next access point, local businesses of interest and river rules.

Many of Ionia County access points were smaller in size and were located in relatively smaller communities than in access points in Kent County. Because of this, Ionia County had fewer amenities and had far less information for paddlers to utilize. Potable water, emergency phones, signage and suitable community

# Recommendations

As noted in the Introduction, this report is supplemental to the Lower Grand River Water Trail Assessment and Improvement Plan for Ottawa County. As such, the recommendations regarding water trail facilities, planning, signage, safety resources, web-presence, community education, branding and messaging, partnerships, and management and coordination are applicable to the water trail development and management in Kent and Ionia Counties (<https://wmeac.org/water/west-michigan-water-trail/>).

Similarly, the additional information contained herein regarding water trail benefits, community education needs surrounding transfer of invasive species, new designation programs, and funding resources are applicable to water trails planning and management in Ottawa County. These two reports should be treated as one resource for the planning and development of a designated Lower Grand River Water Trail.

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