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Rolling on the river

Pat Gillespie launches a week of Grand River development tours

by *Lawrence Cosentino*



The sun hung low over Lansing's River Point Park early Monday morning when Stephen Ward, a salty-bearded fisherman, turned to discover some people discovering the river.

Lansing developer Pat Gillespie and half a dozen staffers were already at the River Street Park boat landing near REO Town, drinking coffee and getting ready to launch a week of boat tours on the Grand River.

Morning to night, Gillespie is leading small groups to showcase the river's potential for development and recreation.

"At the end of this week, a lot of people are going to realize we have a body of water here," Gillespie said. "It's time to use it."

Ward kept an eye on his line. He has fished the Grand since he moved to Lansing in 1968. Was this the sideways look native Patuxets gave Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock?

"I do a lot of night fishing," Ward said. "You hear the frogs. There's muskrats, a couple of minks living near here. You wouldn't think you'd see that in the city."

The development buzz has Ward a little worried.

"That's what the land is for," he said. "To build things on. Why do you want to build on the river?"

Gillespie would spend much of the week answering that question.

As the little chartered boat left the dock and glided east on the Red Cedar toward the Potter Park Zoo, Gillespie, too, extolled the river's natural beauties.

The difference is, a fisherman keeps quiet about his discoveries.

"You'd think you were in the Upper Peninsula," Gillespie said. "Think of the fall color tours."

Joggers waved, several phone cameras, including Gillespie's, popped into the air when a train whizzed by overhead.

"I look at the waterway in Indianapolis, and it's just this concrete thing that's been created," he said. "We have a real river that actually flows and is alive with nature."

So far, about 600 people have signed up for the tours. Gillespie cited a long list of participating groups, including the Lansing Chamber of Commerce, Lansing Economic Area Partnership, the state Department of Environmental Quality, the Accident Fund Insurance Co., the Convention and Visitor's Bureau, and groups from Old Town and the south side.

"I'd say 95 percent of them have never been on the river," Gillespie said.

On Monday morning's maiden tour, four Gillespie staffers and Brian Anderson of the Lansing Economic Development Corp. were on hand.

When the boat followed the Grand River's dramatic downtown bend to the north, conversation stopped. The Ottawa Power Station towered to port, looking much taller than it appears from land. To starboard, the steel skeleton of the new City Market mirrored the stepup lines of the Ottawa plant.

It was no cookie-cutter vista. The buildings, the surrounding green spaces, and the shape of the river had a collective personality, distinctive to Lansing. But what comes next?

If nothing else, the boat tours will dramatically prove that Lansing riverfront development, for decades a purely theoretical notion, is suddenly a reality — tradeoffs included.

"See this tree?" Gillespie said, pointing to a big cottonwood next to the Shiawassee Street bridge. "This whole stretch, from the Lansing Center to here, was nothing but these trees," he said with disapproval. "You couldn't see the banks."

On an aerial map provided to Gillespie's river pilgrims, the stretch of trees shows up as an inch of dark green next to the river. Now that inch is gone and the map is out of date.

The new market and Gillespie's planned Market Place condos will look onto the river, but do those trees have to go?

"You need pockets that are open," Gillespie said. "It's a city."

Gillespie talked of bars, restaurants, kayak and canoe liveries, and regular boat tours from downtown to Old Town. Each tour participant is being asked to contribute ideas on how to use the river.

The slate is not exactly pristine, Gillespie said.

"For 70 or 80 years it's been tool and die shops, industry, some factory housing," he said. "Now that's changing."

Gillespie predicted that development and recreational use would foster more river love, including increased participation in yearly clean-ups.

As Gillespie made his case, the wake of the tour boat's 75-horsepower Mercury outboard motor fanned slowly to the shore. A fisherman in hip waders looked at the boat with a neutral expression. How will you know whether you're using the river or losing it?

"We're far from that," Gillespie said. "This is the first boat that's done this in years. If the river is being used by so many people we have to scale it back, that would be a fun problem to have."

When the boat got back to the landing, Ward was still there, fishing.