

Float down the Grand delivers a story

SEPTEMBER 22, 2009 • FROM LANSING STATE JOURNAL

In 1993, the LSJ issued a call to Lansing to rally for a "Grand Vision" - a renewed commitment to the Grand River as a natural asset to conserve and as an economic asset to leverage into a better future for the capital city.

It's been 16 years since then-Editorial Page Editor Mark Nixon's battle cry for riverine improvement. And, to the credit of many, much has been done to improve Lansing's river.

But, as a recent, eye-opening boat tour along its downtown segment illustrates, there is still much to be done to make the Grand River all it could be.

Developer Pat Gillespie, who has a major investment in how downtown Lansing fares, has been conducting river tours for a bevy of guests. He apparently thinks a view from the water can impart a more powerful message than a slick PowerPoint presentation.

He couldn't be more right.

From a pontoon boat, one can see the riverfront plaza next to the Lansing Center that is the home of the popular Chili Cook-Off event. Before 1993, before the Grand Vision, that area was known for weeds.

From a pontoon boat, one can see a cleaner river, courtesy of the volunteers of the Adopt-A-River program and, of course, to the millions being spent by the city to upgrade the sewer system.

From a pontoon boat, one can see the cranes and crews on the old Ottawa Power Station and the outline of the new City Market. Once the market is done, Gillespie will start on his own river development, the Marketplace array of commercial and retail space.

From a pontoon boat, one can see in the distance the Old Town neighborhood, now finding its stride and identity not just as a nexus for funky shops and art, but also for city events, such as last week's BluesFest.

One can also see, though, a functional, but under-utilized Adado Riverfront Park.

One can see the trees, shrubs and weeds that hide so much of the river from view - and thought.

One can see the numerous downtown buildings constructed with their back to the river. That's the Lansing legacy - a cold shoulder to its own history and future. It's a legacy marked by mistakes, such as the recent one to site the Michigan State Police HQ on prime Grand property when it, frankly, could have been located almost anywhere else downtown.

Lansing has moved far past 1993 - and will make even greater strides in coming months.

But the vision for the Grand, the potential for this river, is not yet met.

That's what stares Lansing in the face for 2010 and beyond.

An LSJ editorial