



Rolling on the River

BY: IVY HUGHES, 9/23/2009



Cities can attract developers to build lofts and investors to back restaurants, but they can't ask Mother Nature to build rivers.

A major river runs through the most populated parts of the [City of Lansing](#), but unfortunately, most people have never been on it, and often times can't even tell when they're near it.

From Sept. 14 to Sept. 18, local developer [Pat Gillespie](#) ran daily riverboat tours on the hour every hour as a call to action for citizens and community leaders to take ownership of the underutilized riverfront and turn it into Lansing's playground.

"As a real estate developer we study things like riverfront developments," Gillespie says. "Places like San Antonio, Milwaukee and Indianapolis, they all have riverfronts. You have a city like Indianapolis that has basically a 25-foot drainage ditch as a river and everyone talks about it and uses it. We have a moving, flowing river and we've turned our backs to it."

The boat, which was manned by [Chain of Lakes Boat Tours'](#) Captain Scotty, carried 14-16 people each trip from Downtown Lansing to Old Town to REO Town.

I took the tour as one of the guilty who has lived in Lansing for years, but has never been on the river. Though I run on the river trail, I never noticed the more than five city parks on it, partly because I can't see them.

"Our forefathers were brilliant and built all of these great parks on the river, but now you can't even see the river," Gillespie says, noting that thick underbrush limits visibility and river access. "I don't want to cut one tree down; I just want to see the river."

Gillespie wants to see the river, but he also wants to see citizens take ownership of the riverfront and turn it into a destination spot, something even more spectacular than the popular 25-foot drainage ditch.

Planting the Seed

By Thursday, Sept. 17, more than 300 people had taken the tour and only nine of them had ever been on the river. Of those nine, only one had been on the river in the last year.

"The joggers look at you like your



some kind of freak," Gillespie says about putting down the river in a boat. "They're like, 'Why is there a boat in the river with people on it?'"

Awareness of the riverfront's economic, recreation and talent retention potential hasn't been realized.

"The biggest problem in the last 15 years is that people say, 'Why can't the city do it?'" says Bob Trezise with the [Lansing Economic Development Corporation](#). "That's not how great cities do it. Ultimately, it is the private sector that must make the decision to invest in the city."

Trezise adds, "The past 50 years have been about the private sector abandoning cities, including Lansing, and now the private sector is re-examining the global,



environmental, high-profile and labor benefits to being in a city again.

Simply put, I think a lot of businesses are returning to Lansing and to cities concluding that, to be competitive, they need the city/downtown environment.”

The riverfront's potential is limitless and in one area, it's being realized. Between Michigan Avenue and Shiawassee, the new [Accident Fund](#) headquarters, the [Lansing Center](#) and Gillespie's [City Market](#) project have put some movement back into the river.

“That’s going to be the postcard for the next five years,” Gillespie says of the southern view from the river that goes from Shiawassee Street to Michigan Avenue.

Development proposals along the river could include restaurants, boat tours for wedding parties at the Lansing Center, river taxis that run from REO Town to Old Town and bars. But, they could also include the reuse of existing but aesthetically ignored buildings.

[Wharton Center](#) Director of Communications Kent Love says it would be fairly easy to create a new mural on the [Riverwalk Theater](#) wall that faces the river. The existing mural is a bit past its prime.

“What a great billboard for a local artist to have on the side of that building,” he says.

The Wharton Center could also manage the nearly invisible Riverfront Park amphitheater, a great spot that sits on the river but is virtually never used.

“What a great opportunity for someone like the Wharton Center or [LCC](#) (Lansing Community College) to encourage getting it painted and adding a sound system to make it more conducive to performing arts,” Love says.

While bricks and mortar developments will bring people to the river, the river speaks for itself, something more people might realize if they could get to the river's parks, fishing areas and gazebos (yep, I saw one) either from its banks or increased kayaking and canoeing access points.

“We see over 100,000 visitors on site annually and many of them don't even realize that we're right on the banks of the Grand River,” says Erik Larson, executive director of Downtown Lansing's [Impression 5 Science Center](#). “This is a real call to action not only for real estate developers, but also for the people to get informed about this natural asset and get them involved.”

One surprising asset along the riverfront might be the Interstate 496 overpass, which covers 40,000 to 50,000 square feet of river space that could be used for festivals or art shows.

“Basically, you would have a covered festival so the success of it would not be determined by inclement weather,” Love says.

Properties values, both residential and commercial, would also see an increase with riverfront improvement and the secret red light district protected by the dense underbrush might have to find a new address.

Gillespie's goal with the riverboat tours was to plant a seed, to encourage citizens to figure out

how to better use one of the area's most attractive resources.

"We're asking a loaded question, but the feedback has been off the charts," Gillespie says. "We want other people to do it. We're giving people ideas to run with. Everyone says the city can do it. Forget the city."

Trezise couldn't say exactly what kind of economic benefits riverfront revitalization would yield, but he says it's there.

"I can tell you that it already encouraged a \$182 million investment," he says, tossing a nod to the new Accident Fund headquarters. "Less than one percent of the people have been on the river. What a breakthrough if the private sector finally does this," Trezise says.

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Photos:

Pat Gillespie brings Bob Trezise and others for a tour of Lansing's riverfront

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