

WAYNE COUNTY

# How the once polluted Rouge River is being reinvented as pathway for trails, recreation

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*Dearborn* — Herman Jenkins stood on Dearborn's Fishway Access Bridge, which connects the Rouge Gateway Greenway to the north side of the Lower Rouge River, pointing southeast to where a heron had just alighted onto the riverbank.

The temperature hovered in the low 40s, the sky steely gray on the late November morning, but a few people still passed over the stretch of the trail near Michigan Avenue, walking dogs or jogging.

Jenkins is the trails manager for Friends of the Rouge, a nonprofit overseeing construction of the Rouge Gateway Greenway, a path for recreation — some of it paved — that will eventually span eight miles from Dearborn, through Melvindale and River Rouge, to the Detroit River.

That peaceful moment as Jenkins and Ashley Flintoff, the nonprofit's executive director, craned to see the bird might have been unimaginable decades ago. The Rouge River, for decades, did not have positive connotations, Jenkins said. The river erupted in flames in 1969, choked with industrial contaminants, including sewage and waste oil.

But now, the river has had a renaissance, with wildlife diversity returning and recreation popular with bikers, pedestrians and kayakers. An expansion of the Rouge Gateway Greenway is a key part of Wayne County's effort for decades to boost accessibility to the existing trails and expand and connect them even more.

Earlier this fall, the county's Board of Commissioners approved \$4.6 million in State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, a part of pandemic recovery money available from the

American Rescue Plan Act, to fund a new phase in the greenway.

Eventually, county officials hope to connect three trail corridors — the Hines Drive Trail from Northville to Dearborn; the Lower Rouge River Greenway from Van Buren Township from Van Buren Township to Dearborn; and the Rouge River Gateway Greenway — to boost recreation opportunities and access to those trails. The three trail corridors run through 17 communities in Wayne County.

"There's a lot of wrong that has been done to these communities as a result of industrialization, and so I think that's why projects like this are so vitally important because they start to try and heal those scars," Flintoff said.

The one completed part of the Rouge Gateway Greenway links to Hines Park and runs from UM-Dearborn to Henry Ford College to Michigan Avenue, and its trailhead sits adjacent to a parking lot by the now-closed Andiamo restaurant on Michigan. The second phase will run southeast to Village Road in Southfield, near The Henry Ford.

Construction of the second phase of the greenway is expected to start by next spring and take about a year and a half, Flintoff said. The funding just appropriated from Wayne County supplements \$1 million from the Ralph C. Wilson Foundation for the phase.

## Access to trails

Trails in Wayne County provide both a literal link to nature and a figurative one to hope of a future where access is available to everyone for leisure and transportation as an alternative to cars. Flintoff said increasing green space and opportunities for outdoor recreation is a step in atoning for harms done by pollution and disconnection from nature to communities along the Rouge River watershed. In addition to overseeing construction of the Rouge Gateway Greenway, Friends of the Rouge is acting as a fiduciary for the funding.

The plan to connect the three corridors is called Connecting the Rouge. The vision also includes connecting the trails adjacent to Hines Drive to nearby neighborhoods to make them easier to access without a car.

Greenways tend to be long, linear open spaces that pass through natural land areas, open spaces and often include trails. They typically are separated from streets and other public rights-of-way. Another massive \$240 million greenway called the Joe Louis Greenway is also taking shape through Wayne County and will eventually run through 23 communities.

Elizabeth Iszler, the chief of planning and design for Wayne County Parks, said making green spaces accessible without cars is at the heart of the Connecting the Rouge plan. Given how developed Wayne County is, building connections to green spaces in its cities is essential, she said.

"If you look at greenways, they're recreation-based, but they're also providing alternatives to residents for transportation if they don't have cars," Iszler said. "They can use them for commuting or getting from place to place safer than if they're having to ride bikes in the road. They're multi-purpose."

Advocates for increasing green spaces hope the COVID-19 pandemic helped bring attention to the importance of equal access to outdoor recreation. Outdoor activities were one of the few counterweights to the social isolation brought on by lockdowns and quarantining.

A study published in 2022 by ScienceDirect suggested outdoor recreation can support mental and physical health, and make people more resilient to global crises such as the pandemic. Two surveys of adults in the U.S. done during 2020 found a correlation between participation in outdoor activities before and during the pandemic and smaller declines in "subjective" well-being, according to the study.

"My perspective as a landscape architect and planner is that everyone should have access to green space," Iszler said. "I think COVID certainly did bring that attention to everyone, which honestly helped us now with 'Why?' If people are asking, 'Why do you want this money to add these trails, or improve these park spaces?'"

The greenway's master plan, developed in 2001, envisions it covering eight miles between Dearborn and the Detroit River, where it would connect to the Joe Louis Greenway. Friends of the Rouge has also developed the Lower Rouge River Water Trail, a 27-mile inland paddling route.

## Rouge River history

As far as expanding the Rouge Gateway Greenway and making it more accessible, Jenkins feels a sense of legacy in his work, because he grew up well aware of the worst parts of the river's history.

It was among three in the U.S. to catch fire in the late 1960s. In 1985, a 23-year-old man from Novi died from leptospirosis, sometimes called rat bite fever, after he fell into the river and

swallowed water.

The summer paddle trips Jenkins takes on the river would have been unimaginable before the Rouge River's turnaround. Jenkins now has a 19-year-old and a 12-year-old, and he's pleased his children can grow up with a different Rouge River than he did.

"I think about the relationship that I had with this river as a kid. My mom would threaten to throw me in this river if I didn't to well in school, because it was that intimidating," Jenkins said. "It did not have any good kind of connotations, but the idea that my kids can have a completely different relationship with this river, that's legacy."

Friends of the Rouge is working with Dearborn to apply for grant funding from MDOT's Transportation Alternatives Program for construction of the greenway's third phase, one of at least seven more planned. Iszler said the intent is for the Rouge Gateway Greenway to connect with the Joe Louis Greenway and eventually go to the Detroit River, or close to it.

## Funding future phases

Flintoff said the Ralph C. Wilson Foundation has committed to helping fund future phases of the greenway. But funding will have to come from other sources too, whether the state, local governments or other philanthropic organizations. Flintoff is hopeful state funding will be an option because of the plan for the Rouge Gateway Greenway to eventually connect to other regional and state greenway infrastructure.

Design development has not yet started beyond the greenway's third phase, she said, because of the funding constraints, meaning an estimated timeline for completing the entire pathway remains up in the air. Flintoff explained working with landowners along industrial portions of the river also requires time to navigate.

Flintoff acknowledged the "collage" of funding also comes with uncertainty. But Flintoff said she believes governments have started to understand the value access to trails and outdoor recreation have to public health.

"If there's going to be any sort of silver lining from from the global pandemic, it's that we really did start to understand the value of access to nature and access to outdoor spaces for folks' mental and physical well-being," she said.

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