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‘Point’ is epicenter for restoring gem

Cullen Park boat launch, basin slated for dredging to better tie into ship way

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BLADE OUTDOORS COLUMNIST

Big things to benefit recreational users of the Maumee River and Bay and western Lake Erie — from anglers and waterfowlers to boaters, canoeists, and kayakers — are under way out Point Place way.

Two groups of interested residents in this high-energy Toledo waterside community, along with cooperative city and state authorities, are polishing up two diamonds in the rough — Cullen Park and the lower Ottawa River — with an eye to turning them collectively into a crown jewel of water recreation.

A major dredging project is set for July through October to create a wide, easily navigable channel connecting the Cullen launch ramps, just off Summit Street, with the main Toledo Ship Channel in the Maumee River. In recent years the shallow surrounding waters have become so silted that the ramps often seem usable for little more than floating rubber duckies. Strong southwest winds turn it into little more than mudflats.

But a Point Place group, acting under the banner of Visions of Cullen Park, has secured a \$400,000 grant from the Ohio Division of Watercraft and \$100,000 in city money for the dredging. Dale Rupert, dredging project engineer for the city, noted the plan was sketched out in 2008, "and it's finally coming to fruition."

The waters around the ramps and docks will be dredged to eight feet deep at low-water datum [normal level is two feet higher], and an 80-foot-wide, 4,000-foot-long channel will stretch to the Ship Channel which is maintained at 28 feet by the Army Corps of Engineers. The channel will be at least five feet deep at low-water, said Rupert, "so we'll have seven feet of water most times.

"When it blows southwest you've still got water to get in." Rupert added that "the boating that has been going north and east now will be able to come back to Toledo."

Indeed, the Visions group promotes it thusly in a summary:

"When completed Cullen Park will be the only deepwater access for 20 miles of shoreline around the Toledo area. Boaters will be only five minutes from their trailer to some of the best walleye fishing in Lake Erie. We would like to see some large fishing tournaments for the spring walleye run and increased use in the fall by duck hunters and fishermen alike when normally there is not

enough water to float a boat."

Gene Kidd, Visions co-chairman and himself an avid angler and waterfowler, said angling opportunities in the lower river and its mouth and the bay are often overlooked and may surprise some fishermen. Gravel bars and shoreline structure attract both walleye and bass seasonally, he said.

While the new Cullen Park channel is the linchpin of the Visions plan, it is not all, not by a long shot. An application, due by April 1, is being drawn up for another state watercraft grant, which if awarded would seriously revamp the ramps-parking-docking in the park as well.

"We started out small to get some improvements in the park and it has just blown out of sight," said Vee Stader, Visions founder and co-chairman. "We're going to get the dredging done, that's the big thing, starting in July." A 76-year-old great-grandmother, Stader calls Visions "my last hurrah."

Initially it was hoped to start dredging April 1, but it was delayed so as not to interfere with the spring walleye and white bass spawning runs up the river. By happy coincidence, the new channel should be done in time for the 50-year anniversary of Cullen Park, which was dedicated Oct. 20, 1961.

"When the dredging [grant] came through, it changed the whole approach," said Steve Day, a landscape architect with the city division of engineering services. "What it shows," adds Denny Garvin, commissioner of parks and forestry, "is that the city is serious. Vee and the Visions for Cullen Park group are a model of best practices for getting things done. They've been very inclusive. [Visions] will be a whole other boating experience."

Visions also has been consistent and persistent, said Day. "It started out as a brainstorming session at one of our meetings," noted Gary Anderson, immediate past president of the Point Place Business Association.

As for the reasons behind the pending grant application for launch-ramp and park improvements, Day explained that no improvements have been made since the 1970s and an upgrade to current standards is necessary.

While final details of the ramp-dock-parking plan are being fine-tuned, improvements deemed worth pursuing include reducing the number of ramps from four to three but making them wider and up to current standards, this in conjunction with a new courtesy dock to aid in staging and traffic management at the ramps.

Parking lanes for trailer rigs also would be widened from 10 feet to 11 feet, while retaining room for 101 rigs.

Oh, and let's not forget the Ottawa River side of the Point's ambitious water recreation plans. Enter Point entrepreneur and promoter Howard Pinkley, one of the spark plugs behind the new and thriving Northwest Ohio River Runners.

NWORR is a family-style canoe, kayak, and rowing-shell organization to promote hand-powered water sports. It is based on the Ottawa River but maintains a reach limited only by draft of the craft in use. A year old, the club now has 50 members and is open to welcoming more.

The River Runners meet the fourth Tuesday of the month [March 22 upcoming] at 6:30 p.m. at Friendship Park Community Center on 131st Street.

The base of operations for club and casual paddling is at Riviera Park, 2300 Shoreland Ave., using the broad flat stretch of the restored river between the Suder Avenue and Summit Street bridges. "Nobody is using that part of the river," noted Pinkley. "It's ideal. You can come here and paddle anytime you want."

NWORR president Dave Zobler said that in-seasons meetings are held on the river, with two-hour trips part of the program.

The paddlers also have navigated Swan Creek and Halfway Creek on the Michigan side. Emphasis is on family involvement.

"The whole concept is how can we get kids off the streets, out of drugs, and bring families together," said Pinkley.

It does not take too much of a stretch of imagination to see a flotilla of NWORR paddlers some summer evening soon, setting out from Riviera Park and following the Ottawa shoreline out and around the Point and thence up the Maumee to the courtesy docks as the re-Visioned Cullen Park.

To learn more about Visions of Cullen Park, contact Kidd at 419-726-2491 or e-mail him at gunandalake@aol.com. For the paddlers, visit online at www.NWORR.org.

Commentary: The community action efforts of Visions for Cullen Park mesh wonderfully with efforts of the new and growing NWORR. These initiatives collectively are the role model, a lesson, for how individuals, communities, and arms of government — in this case local and state — can work together and get things done. All hands deserve hearty applause. Can you imagine what kind of country this might be if this example was followed all the way to Columbus and Washington, D.C., and beyond? What a contrast with the ugly, petty, polarized, political backstabbing that characterizes too much of the ways things currently are being [or not getting] done.

--Upcoming — Friday through March 20, 19th annual Ohio Deer and Turkey Expo, Ohio Expo Center, State Fairgrounds, 717 East 17th Ave., Columbus. Call 1-800-324-3337 or visit online www.deerinfo.com.

Saturday — special youth spring wild turkey-hunt drawing for Lake La Su An State Wildlife Area, Williams County, register 9:30 a.m., area headquarters, 09-455 Road R, Pioneer. Call the area headquarters 419-485-9092 or Ohio Wildlife District 2 at 419-424-5000.

Saturday, 50th anniversary, Ohio Huskie Muskie Club, Cherry Valley Lodge, Newark, Ohio.
Call Fred Lederer 419-874-4929 or visit online www.ohmci.org.

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