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New ‘State of the Rivers’ Report: Great potential for river recreation in region

The potential for river recreation in Greater Des Moines is significant and largely untapped, a new report finds.

That is a central takeaway from “State of the Rivers,” a new online resource that is rich with research on 150 miles of creeks and rivers in central Iowa. The report documents the current conditions of the metro waterways – identifying existing uses, opportunities, and challenges – as part of a larger effort to develop a Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Plan.

“We’ll never have mountains or oceans in central Iowa, but we have an abundance of rivers that we should be embracing as a region,” said Rick Tollakson, the president and CEO of Hubbell Realty Co. who is chairing the Water Trails Steering Committee. “If we come up with an ambitious but achievable plan, our rivers can become a signature recreational amenity for Greater Des Moines. The question now is, what is our vision?”

The public is invited to share their ideas on the newly opened Water Trails Input Map, an interactive online mapping tool that lets visitors sketch out their concepts for natural-area preservation and recreational development in and along the rivers and creeks of Greater Des Moines. The Water Trails Input Map is available at www.dmampo.org/water-trails/ and will remain open through Wednesday, March 30.

The Water Trails and Greenways Plan is being developed by the Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization on behalf of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. The plan covers the Des Moines, Raccoon, South Skunk, North and Middle rivers, as well as Beaver, Four Mile, Mud and Walnut creeks. A draft plan will be released for public comment in early summer of 2016; the final plan is expected by late 2016.

Major takeaways from the “State of the Rivers” report include:

- **Access** – Today people have limited access to the rivers and creeks of Greater Des Moines. Expanding the number of access points – such as boat launches, equipment rentals, and information about recreational opportunities – would give people more options to explore rivers in more ways.
- **Water quality** – The region’s rivers and creeks are polluted to varying degrees, and they are “flashy” due to excessive storm-water run-off during rainstorms. Improving water quality and stability will attract more people to the rivers.
- **Safety** – Threats to the safety of users – whether mild or severe, real or perceived – can act as a deterrent to users. Encouraging a culture of water safety through user education, accurate information on current conditions, and options for safe recreational experiences will be critical to expanding river recreation.
- **Greenways habitat** – The rivers act as corridors of natural habitat throughout the region. Conserving these natural corridors would add to the diversity of wildlife and the health of the rivers.
- **Passionate people** – Many people in the community – from current users to business leaders – have engaged in this planning process and have great enthusiasm for improving the region’s waterways.

For more information, please visit to dmampo.org/water-trails, call 515-334-0075 or email info@dmampo.org.

Des Moines Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) acts as a regional forum to ensure coordination between the public and local, state, and federal agencies in regard to planning issues and to prepare transportation plans and programs. The MPO develops both long- and short-range multimodal transportation plans, selects and approves projects for federal funding based upon regional priorities, and develops methods to reduce traffic congestion.