



BY TERRI FINCH HAMILTON

'A journey along the river'

The Grand River Greenway Initiative could be GR's nature-filled gateway to the lakeshore.



Monica and Tony Verplank (center) enjoy Connor Bayou Park with sons Roan and Hunter.

Monica Verplank is the kind of mom who wanted to do a dunes hike before Mother's Day brunch.

You'll often find her family enjoying Ottawa County's parks. They thrill at the blue herons, hawks and turtles that live along the Grand River. Her sons, Roan, 11, and Hunter, 8, love inspecting the different types of moss that grow at different parks because of the varied ecosystems.

Why visit one Ottawa County park when you can hit a few in a weekend?

That's the idea behind the Grand River Explorer's Trail, the latest critical piece of the Ottawa County Parks Department's Grand River Greenway Initiative. When it's completed, the trail is planned to connect seven Ottawa County parks, in addition to connecting Grand Rapids, Grand Haven and Grand Valley State University.

"When the parks are connected, visiting them will be more of a journey along the river than just a trip to a park and a playground," said Verplank, co-chair of the Grand River Greenway Campaign, which is raising funds to create the trail.

If you're up for an adventure, keep your eye on this trail. The \$41-million Grand River Greenway Initiative has been a primary focus of the Ottawa County Parks Depart



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHNNY QUIRIN

Connor Bayou Park in Robinson Township

“Artists and poets have known for decades that being out in nature does our mind and body good. Now, doctors and researchers are finding actual clinical benefits to being outside.”
— Monica Verplank



Eagle nest at Grand Ravines



Connor Bayou Park in Robinson Township

ment for the past 20 years. Its goal: protecting thousands of acres of natural lands, creating green infrastructure, developing new recreational opportunities and connecting communities.

So far, \$20 million in mostly public funding has been invested to preserve more than 2,400 acres of land and create 13 parks and open spaces along the Greenway. Next up: acquire another 1,000 acres of land and connect these parks with a 27-mile trail measuring 10 feet wide for walkers, runners and cyclists.

The plan, which would protect some of the highest-quality land remaining along the Grand River, is to invest an additional \$21 million over the next five years to make it happen. The fundraising has started, with the Ottawa County Parks Foundation spearheading the Grand River Greenway Campaign.

There are plenty of Ottawa County parks, each with its own personality and

amenities, from wooded trails to expansive wetlands to plunging ravines where massive tulip trees thrive.

Why is it so important to connect them?

“That saying, ‘A whole is bigger than the sum of its parts,’ applies here,” said John Scholtz, director of the Ottawa County Parks and Recreation Commission.

“If these parks dotted along the Grand River were never connected, they would still have value,” Scholtz said. “But if you link them, there’s an added benefit. A synergy.”

“A family in Georgetown Township could hop on their bikes, pack a picnic, ride to Grand Ravines Park and do some hiking, then ride to The Bend area, where there will be a beach, and go for a swim,” he said. “It will really enhance the area for folks, instead of just driving to one park and spending half a day there.”

Consider it an invitation to adventure.

“We picked ‘Explorer’s Trail’ as the name for it because that’s exactly what

you’ll be able to do,” Scholtz said. “Explore a lot of parks and have a lot of different experiences.”

The initial plan will connect seven Ottawa County parks, Scholtz said, including Connor Bayou, Riverside Park, Eastmanville Bayou, Grand Ravines, Grand River Park, Bend Area and a currently unnamed site near the county line. Eventually, it also will link to Kuits Bayou.

He loves imagining all the people out on the trail.

“The joggers, the walkers, the people who get up and out early to enjoy nature,” Scholtz mused. “Wildlife viewers, bird watchers.”

“There are people who love riding their bikes long distances,” he said. “They could start in Grand Rapids and ride to the lake shore.”

People who love the outdoors move to areas specifically for this kind of experience, Scholtz said.

“Amenities like this are more and more important all the time, as local economies try to grow and as we try to keep jobs in the area,” Scholtz said. “The Greenway Trail will be a significant amenity.”

Scholtz is excited for Grand Valley State University students, who live a stone’s throw from Grand Ravines.

“From a student’s perspective, it will be fantastic,” he said. “Our Greenway trail will go up through campus. They can ride from one campus to another. Or ride from Allendale to Millennium Park.”

“Millennials choose where they want to live, then look for jobs there,” Scholtz said. “We want to be that place where people want to live.”

While many people equate the word “greenway” with a trail, that’s not how Scholtz sees it.

“This greenway isn’t just a winding asphalt trail, but a corridor of preserved



Grand Ravines

“We picked ‘Explorer’s Trail’ as the name for it because that’s exactly what you’ll be able to do. Explore a lot of parks and have a lot of different experiences.”
— John Scholtz

land that links parks together,” he said. “I love the trail part of it, but I also love knowing we’re preserving and protecting some high-quality natural features that people can enjoy along the way.”

As campaign co-chair, Verplank has an extra interest in connecting these parks. She wants to keep everybody healthy.

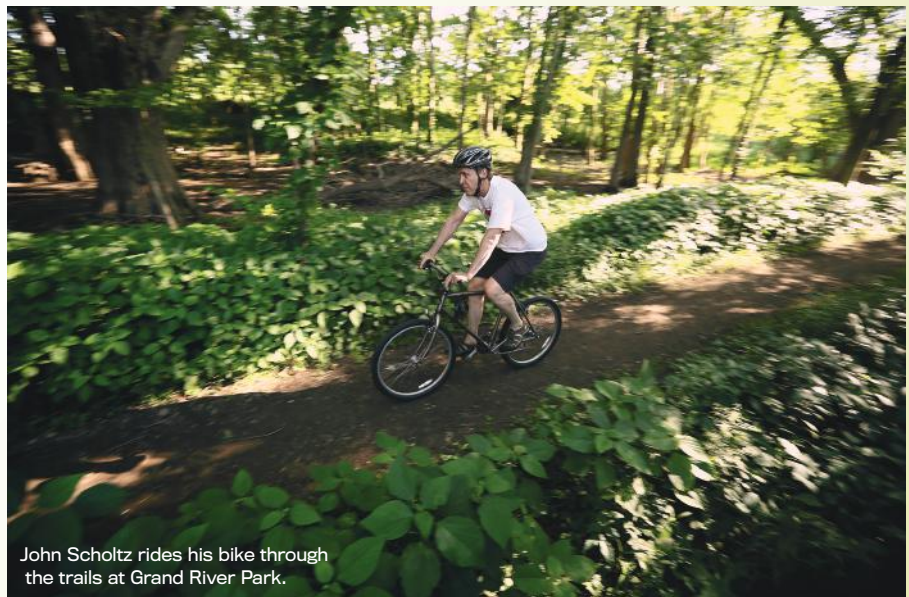
“When I look into my crystal ball, I see people not just enjoying the Greenway because they want to spend time with their families, hiking or biking or kayaking or just playing tag — but because they know there are amazing health benefits just being outside on a Saturday,” Verplank said.

A former public school educator, Verplank now teaches mindfulness and meditation. Nature boosts our health, she said.

“Artists and poets have known for decades that being out in nature does our mind and body good,” she said. “Now, doctors and researchers are finding actual clinical benefits to being outside.”

Doctors write prescriptions to go to the park, she said. A 15-minute walk in the woods decreases stress hormones and lowers blood pressure and heart rate.

“We’re all so overscheduled and overworked,” Verplank said. “Treating ourselves



John Scholtz rides his bike through the trails at Grand River Park.

to nature sounds so good, doesn’t it?

“Instead of saying, ‘I should eat fewer fries,’ how about (you) enjoy a day in nature and experience the health benefits that happen,” she said. “It’s always more fun to add something than to take something away, right?”

GR