

A new way to paddle the Catawba River

Rock Hill kayaker promotes idea of 'chutes' built in water to create 'play waves.'

By Matt Garfield

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Jackson



Connie Donovan of Rock Hill sits on a bank with her kayak at Rock Hill's Riverwalk park. Rock Hill officials plan a publicly funded cycling and outdoor center as part of Riverwalk. ANDY BURRISS - andyburriss@heraldonline.com



The Catawba Cruisers launch their kayaks at the Fort Mill access area on the Catawba River.
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Chris Jackson has a vision for bringing life to Rock Hill's stretch of the Catawba River.

A self-described kayaking nut, Jackson thinks he's found a way to turn the Catawba into a haven for paddlers, maybe even a place for training and competitive events.

The idea: Install concrete shapes to create chutes along a designated portion of water. Then let the river handle the rest.

When Duke Energy releases water from the Lake Wylie dam, the flow would generate Rock Hill's own whitewater rapids, with no ongoing costs or maintenance required.

"Just add water," Jackson says.

The rapids - or play waves, as kayakers call them - would occupy a small area, leaving plenty of room to go around on flat water.

For now, this is one man's quest, but Jackson hopes to build support among fellow paddlers and local officials searching for ways to promote ecotourism in York County.

"I've driven five hours to make one run on a creek," said 35-year-old kayaker Shane Adams of Rock Hill. "There are guys who do it religiously. It would be a huge benefit if it was right here."

Jackson took inspiration from the U.S. National Whitewater Center, a man-made course in southwestern Mecklenburg County.

The Catawba idea is smaller in scale, Jackson said, relying on a natural setting and a flow of water already happening. Duke releases water on many weekends for recreational purposes.

Bennish Brown, director of the York County Convention & Visitors Bureau, said he's interested but needs to know more. Eco-tourism along the river represents a valuable niche, Brown's group has found.

"For me, the attraction is it takes advantage of a natural body," Brown said. "It's something we already have.... We've got to do some homework. The question is, how far can we help take this?"

Other communities have created similar spots on rivers, including Rio Vista Falls Park in San Marcos, Texas, and a project under way on the Beech Fork River in Bardstown, Ky.

Costs can range from \$300,000 to \$1 million, a review of similar venues showed. Jackson hopes local tourism groups can pursue grants. He has no plans to ask local governments for money.

Over the years, hikers and boaters have lamented few opportunities for public recreation along the Catawba River. There are signs of progress, including a 2.25-mile public trail that opened this month

at Rock Hill's Riverwalk development.

More than 2,400 visitors used the trail in the first two weeks, according to traffic counts from city of Rock Hill parks officials.

"This is sort of like our ocean," City Manager Carey Smith said at a trail opening ceremony. "It's a great natural resource that's been provided to us."

Rock Hill officials plan a publicly funded cycling and outdoor center as part of Riverwalk, site of the former Celanese industrial plant on North Cherry Road.

On a recent weekday morning, Jackson made his way down the Riverwalk trail, pointing out scenic spots and recalling past excursions.

"People are hungry for this stuff," said Jackson, 54. "The river is just a natural place to have a recreational area. What a gift we have here."