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HOMES

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Published: Tuesday, Jul. 27, 2010 / Updated: Monday, Jul. 26, 2010 08:47 PM

Whitewater on the Catawba?

Local residents are coming up with new ideas for making the river a destination.

The Catawba River has run through York County for eons, but oddly enough, residents have begun to recognize it as a premier public recreation attraction only recently.

Perhaps more than anything, the opening this month of the 2.25-mile public trail at Rock Hill's Riverwalk development has stirred the imaginations of people in the area about the potential uses of the river. More than 2,400 visitors used the trail in the first two weeks it was open.

Thousands more will use the trail in the weeks and months ahead. The local trail eventually will become part of the Carolina Thread Trail that will span two states from the mountains of North Carolina to the Lowcountry of South Carolina.

And people not only will walk beside the river, but more and more also will get out onto the water. One benefit of the new trail is easy access points where kayakers and canoeists can enter the water.

One local kayaker has an idea about how to enhance Rock Hill's stretch of the Catawba. Chris Jackson, who is known to travel five hours to find new whitewater on which to kayak, advocates giving Mother Nature a helping hand to produce "play waves" on the Catawba.

He and a number of fellow kayakers would like to see large concrete shapes installed along a designated portion of the water to create chutes to channel water and create whitewater runs. The flow would be enhanced by water released from Lake Wylie Dam on weekends by Duke Energy.

Jackson stresses that once the concrete structures are in place, the river would do the rest. No ongoing maintenance would be required.

Jackson was inspired by the U.S. National Whitewater Center in southwestern Mecklenburg County. But other communities have created similar attractions in their own rivers.

Cost of the project could range from \$300,000 to \$1 million. Proponents aren't looking for money from local governments, but they hope that tourism groups could pursue grant money or use the local tourism tax to help pay for it.

Bennish Brown, director of the York County Convention & Visitors Bureau, is interested but non-committal. And that's appropriate at this point.

Local officials would have to do their homework before giving a thumbs-up to such a project. But the idea is promising, and as Jackson notes, it is low-maintenance and uses a natural body of water.

This is not likely to be the last proposal for ways to attract visitors to the river.

We hope that any projects considered will have a minimal impact on the river and the natural surroundings.

After all, the unspoiled natural beauty of the river is what makes it such an outstanding resource in the first place.