The Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Parkway stretches diagonally across the state of Wisconsin for 280 miles, connecting 15 counties, 40 municipalities and more than 1.3 million people. This water trail is the same exploration route Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jollett took in 1673 in search of the Northwest passage. Traveling from bay of Green Bay in the northeast to the Mississippi River in the southwest, the explorers used the Fox River and Wisconsin River to unlock a water route to the west and link the Great Lakes Basin to the Gulf of Mexico.

In June 2013, the National Park Service designated the Parkway as a National Recreation Trail. The longest water trail in the state to receive this designation, it celebrates how these rivers “have shaped the State’s journey through significant historical events, industrial breakthroughs, cultural advances, enjoyment of recreational riches, and environmental recovery.”

Our non-profit organization is dedicated to promoting the history, improving access and preserving the future of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers. Three years have gone into feasibility studies, planning and input from the residents and businesses along the river corridor to identify projects that must be implemented to connect these rivers, preserve the rich, cultural heritage that can be found around every river bend and provide sustainability that residents and visitors can enjoy for generations to come.

The Travel Industry Association of America (TIAA) and tourism futurists believe the travel markets that are most likely to increase in coming years are those seeking enrichment, health, revitalization, enhancement, ecotourism, and soft adventure. It is nature and the history that people experience along the way that will make this water route a signature Wisconsin attraction.
Two Characteristically Diverse Rivers

The Fox and Wisconsin Rivers are home to many rich stories, some already told, others yet to drift along. Through the years, these vital rivers have fed and clothed those who dwelled beside them, opened the country to European settlement, powered mighty factories and beckoned all around to delight in their beauty and bounty. They have provided so much while asking nothing in return. Today, the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers need your support. It’s time to - love your river.

Creating One Water Trail with its Own Unique Character

The Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Waterway runs across the state of Wisconsin and connects the Great Lakes with the Mississippi River. Originally designed for steamboat traffic, this river system is comprised of two unique rivers. The industrialized Fox River includes one of only two hand-operated navigable lock systems remaining in the U.S. The wild and scenic Wisconsin River’s beauty and diverse flora and fauna boasts observable geological features created by glaciers more than 12,000 years ago.

Connecting the two rivers is “The Portage”. More than 10,000 years old, the portage bridges the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers, by a walk of 2,700 paces. The canal is no longer operational in an effort to keep invasive species in the Lower Wisconsin from migrating to the Upper Fox, leaving this land stretch to bridge the two water bodies.

Turning this route into a water trail requires landing sites and additional portage points to be constructed to make it possible for non-motorized watercraft to travel from Green Bay to Prairie du Chien whether the locks are open, or a train is expected to cross the river.

Creating this water trail offers opportunities for future public-private partnerships, including tourism and river-based economic revitalization that will benefit communities along the river. And eventually, the water trail will link with the hiking/biking trail system creating an outstanding destination for recreation on land and water.

The abundance of dragonflies on the river system is a symbol of the improving health of the ecosystem.
Easy Access for Everyone

The rivers are what draw visitors to the Parkway. Accessible landings, in accordance with the American Disabilities Act (ADA), will make it possible for everyone to enjoy the water trail. With easier access, visitors will be able to travel the Parkway more often and for lengthier stays. The landings will be equipped with hand rails and rollers that allow boaters to climb into a canoe or kayak and slide their watercraft in and out of the river without getting their feet wet. Dry shoes and clothing can make a difference in extending the length of the paddling season.

The goal of the Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Parkway is to build 15 accessible landings along the river corridor. The Parkway is working closely with area municipalities to choose the best sites for the accessible landings. We are raising private funds to build the landings, will gift them to the municipalities, and will ask their help with installation and ongoing maintenance.

The total cost for creating one, continuous 280 mile water trail is estimated at $650,000. Sponsorships are available for $43,150 and include one accessible landing, surrounding water trail infrastructure to support that landing, signage and trail map development. Naming rights are available for those companies and individuals who choose to underwrite one of these landings.

Creating Living History through Lock House Renovation

Wisconsin’s Fox River Navigational System Authority is currently renovating the Lower Fox lock system to keep the river an active waterway for recreation and enjoyment. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, lock tender homes were built for the men who operated the 17 locks to live with their families. With strong support from Wisconsin’s State Historic Preservation Office, the Parkway is looking to restore four of the homes to their original glory with furnishings, trim and decor authentic to the time period. The homes are located in Little Chute and in Appleton.

The Parkway’s plan is to use the homes as vacation rentals during the summer months and select weekends throughout the year. During the school year, the homes will be open during the week as an educational resource for school and visitor tours. The homes are adjacent to one of only two hand-operated lock systems still working in the U.S. Vacationers will have the opportunity during their stay to work with the official lock tender to operate the lock as watercraft pass through. Inside each of the homes, interpretive exhibits illustrating the stories of the river will be on display to help bring the stories to life.

The homes need a lot of work. While the exterior of the houses are rehabbed, the interiors need to be demolished due to water damage, mold and vandalism. Modern plumbing and electrical systems need to be installed and renovation is estimated at approximately $200,000 per home. We are looking for individual and corporate partners to join us in the restoration of these homes. The distinctive nature of these homes and their riverfront location make them a unique attraction to visitors.
Signs of What’s to Come

With so much to see and do along the Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Parkway, it is important to call out the historical and recreational highlights along its river banks. To help raise awareness of the waterway and its unique history, the Parkway needs signage and maps that tell visitors what lies around each bend. The Parkway has identified key locations in communities to place kiosks and anchor displays along the 280-mile river corridor. The kiosks are outdoor units that will serve to call out historical and recreational highlights and provide an agenda of things to do and see in the immediate vicinity. They will include QR codes that link visitors to more in-depth information about nearby heritage sites. Three of these kiosks are currently planned, one near the Merrimac Ferry, the Kaukauna Hydro Park, and one near the De Pere Lock. The signage will have a strong public art element to enhance the site.

The anchor displays are year-round exhibits located in the lobbies of partnering institutions to showcase stories of the water trail and give visitors the scope of what the Parkway has to offer. It is the hope of the Parkway to establish two anchor institutions this year and to add one partner each year for the next four years.

These kiosks and anchor displays can serve to elevate the presence of your corporation or business in the communities you serve. The cost for this signage is estimated between $30,000 and $40,000 per kiosk.

Find Your Connection to the River

These projects connect us all to the history, culture and recreational opportunities unique to the Parkway. By preserving our heritage and improving access to one of Wisconsin’s greatest river resources, residents and visitors will be able to engage in its many offerings, enriching our minds while promoting outdoor sport and activity.