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TOP STORY

Paddlers to get more access to Dorchester's hidden treasure

By Brenda Rindge brindge@postandcourier.com Jun 6, 2018 Updated Jun 7, 2018



Alexis Morrison and Mike McCreary take out after kayaking the Ashley River from Jessen Landing in Summerville on a sunny June 2, 2018. Jervon Lucas (left) keeps an eye on sons Roary and Maddux Morris while waiting to put in. The area is part of the Ashley River Blue Trail, comprised of "access sites, cultural and historical sites, and public lands." Wade Spees/Staff

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The Ashley River was a hidden treasure when Howard Bridgman moved to Summerville 42 years ago.

“There weren’t any public accesses to speak of,” he said. “If you wanted to get to the river, you had to park on the side of either Bacons Bridge Road or Highway 17A and risk your life taking your boat down and getting it to the river.”



Jervon Lucas paddles up the Ashley River with sons Roary and Maddux Morris from Jessen Landing in Summerville on a sunny June 2, 2018. The area is part of the Ashley River Blue Trail, comprised of "access sites, cultural and historical sites, and public lands." Wade Spees/Staff

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But by all accounts, it was worth the effort to experience the flora, fauna and history along the river.

Now, Dorchester County and the town of Summerville are both concentrating access efforts on the Ashley River. The county has opened a new launch site and is planning another, and both the county and the town have bought riverfront land to halt rapid growth.

“The time’s really right for this,” said County Parks and Recreation Director Eric Davis. “People are seeing major development coming in, some of this land is being chewed up and at risk.”

The Ashley River Blue Trail winds its way through 30 miles of a tidally influenced ecosystem from the Great Cypress Swamp in upper Dorchester to Charleston Harbor.

Its banks include settlements dating back centuries, including Colonial Dorchester State Park, Drayton Hall, Magnolia Plantation, Middleton Place and Charles Towne Landing State Historic Site.

"It's such a rich history that we have here but you can't embrace it if you can't see it," said Josh Raglin, chairman of the county Conservation Commission, who has recently started exploring the upper river, which is mostly inaccessible to motorboats.

"We've pretty much explored the river from Jessen Boat Landing down to Charleston but it's only recently that we've been exploring the upper end. It's just absolutely gorgeous. It's so quiet and peaceful. You would never know that Dorchester Road is on one side and Highway 61 is on the other."

Because much of the river is surrounded by wetlands, development along its banks has been minimal.

"Finally, people are starting to see the value in the area," said Summerville Town Councilman Bob Jackson, the District 6 representative. "For a long time, nobody knew we even had a river."

Access to public waterways ranked fifth out of 23 recreational opportunities residents desire, according to results from a 2016 county survey. Officials agreed.

"We wanted to get more access to the river, feeling that if people got a chance to be on the river, they would want to preserve it," said Bridgman, who is on the Conservation Commission and is also a longtime member of the Ashley River Scenic River Advisory Council. "That's coming to reality now."



Ken, Karen, and Rebecca Lux drift along the Ashley River from the Howard Bridgman Access at Bacons Bridge in Dorchester County on June 2, 2018. They were trying out Karen's new kayak, a Christmas present. The area is part of the Ashley River Blue Trail, comprised of "access sites, cultural and historical sites, and public lands." Wade Spees/Staff

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The advisory council, in partnership with the state Department of Natural Resources, created a management plan with goals of maintaining and improving the river's water quality; improving accessible and navigability; and encouraging low-impact uses of the river.

"The Ashley River is a gem of Dorchester County and we are excited about our successful efforts to preserve the natural beauty while also increasing public access to the river and all it has to offer," said District 7 County Councilman Jay Byars.

The Conservation Commission's recommended doubling the river's buffer to 100 feet, a proposal that is wending its way through the governmental process but has found support on council.

"The greatest thing for us is we need to preserve whatever green space we can," Bridgman said. "And if we can put a green space together with the river, we're really hitting two home runs there."

Jackson first ran for Town Council in 2007 because of concern for the Ashley's future.

Council had approved the development of condos and apartments on a 38-acre site adjacent to town-owned Herbert H. Jessen Boat Landing. "When they started clearing the land, I couldn't believe that the town had approved it," he said. "That's what motivated me to run."

Last month, council voted to buy the site, known as "Bend on the Ashley," for up to \$900,000 collected from hospitality and impact fees.

"I've been talking to the developer and the owner off and on over 10 years, and the price was just always too high to put taxpayer money to it," Jackson said. "Now, they came down and we were able to meet in the middle."

Roads, water and sewer are already built, and the tract features an eight-slip floating dock. Plans are still being discussed but the site is likely to house picnic areas, a tackle/outfitter shop, café and education center, Jackson said.

The town is also planning to expand Jessen Landing by adding a launch for paddlers to the current two-lane landing. The site marks the point where the channel widens enough for motorboats.



Howard Bridgman Access at Bacons Bridge in Dorchester County, part of the Ashley River Blue Trail, comprised of "access sites, cultural and historical sites, and public lands." Wade Spees/Staff
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Until the county opened its first launch in December, Jessen's was the last public access point on the upper part of the river.

The county's launch, now dubbed the Howard Bridgman River Access at Bacons Bridge, is a carry-down facility for canoes, kayaks, paddleboards and small john boats.

It is part of Ashley River Park, which is still in the planning stages but will include walking paths, a dog park, event space, a ropes course and more on an 85-acre tract off Bacons Bridge Road.

Plans also call for one day connecting it to the county's only existing park, Rosebrock Park. Located off S.C. Highway 61, Rosebrock is a passive park with a trail that winds through about 70 acres of bottomland forest and wetlands.

A second landing on Swan Drive in Teal on the Ashley, called Sland's Landing, will be similar to the one at Ashley Park.

Halfway between the two landings, the county purchased 128 acres of flood plain and forest last summer known as Walnut Hill last summer. There are no plans for the tract yet.

“We bought it primarily just for conservation because it was valuable,” Davis said. “There’s been a lot of focus on recreation and conservation on the Ashley and a lot of times, you can do both with the same piece of property and that’s what we want to do. If we conserve land we want to provide some degree of public access to it.”

While Dorchester County is looking to preserve its section of the river, North Charleston recently removed from its Ashley River Scenic District a swatch from Interstate 526 to the Northbridge. There are no specific plans for the area, but the move is meant to spur redevelopment of a former industrial zone and did not affect the portion of the city that is across the river from the historic plantation sites visited by thousands of tourists annually.

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