



Everything Michigan

Portland makes the most of its Grand River heritage

Published: Monday, July 19, 2010, 2:31 PM Updated: Monday, July 19, 2010, 9:53 PM



Brian VanOchten | The Grand Rapids Press



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Scenic addition: Wanda Urie, owner of Distinctive Occasions, says visitors are impressed by the boardwalk that borders the Grand River in Portland.

PORTLAND — A couple of miles off the beaten path along I-96, about halfway between Lansing and Grand Rapids, lies one of the proudest and friendliest communities in Michigan.

The sources of pride in Portland are many.

The pride comes from being named a Main Street Community in 2003 and a Cool City in 2004, becoming the first city in Michigan to receive both designations and one of only four cities to snag both honors. Those special designations afforded access to hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funding that have been tapped to help transform the downtown setting into a Norman Rockwell painting come-to-life.

It comes from the preservation of historic buildings, the construction of a boardwalk running along the Grand River and a paved River Trail system that will stretch for almost nine miles and form a loop around this community of nearly 4,000 residents upon its completion later this summer.

"It's just incredible what they've done here," said Patrick Reagan, 36, who helps coordinate the preservation of historic buildings in the downtown area.

Early days as a trading post

Portland, situated at the confluence of the Grand River and Looking Glass River in Ionia County, is a place that never misses a chance to take full advantage of its heritage as the "City of Two Rivers." It was founded as a township in 1836, with settlers viewing the intersecting rivers as an ideal location for trading post deliveries and transportation.



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Clean and colorful: The riverfront facades of buildings were restored using historically accurate colors. Enjoying the boardwalk are, from left, Tara Walkotten, of Portland, Stacey Johnston, of Portland, and Tia Halsted, of Pewamo.

The \$1 million elevated Kent Street boardwalk project overlooking the Grand River at the rear of the first block of the commercial district has spurred a wave of downtown development amid tough economic times. It has been a catalyst for renewal, helping businesses create a second storefront facing the river, promoting the rental of loft apartments and office space and providing a magnet for locals and tourists to gather.

The project was completed in October 2006.

"I'm very pleased with it," said Wanda Urie, owner of Distinctive Occasions, 160 Kent St. "In general, I hear a lot of compliments, especially from people who're from out of town. Two thumbs up."

Trail leads to the river

The boardwalk is a scenic span that links to pedestrian bridges connected to the River Trail. The concrete path is lined with wrought-iron railings and includes some dining areas.

A.J. and Wanda Urie contributed \$3,000 to the boardwalk project.

"It is good for Portland, and it has been good for us," A.J. Urie said of the reinvestment in downtown. "I don't think it has paid off in terms of increased business so much, but I think it'll pay off over time."

The merchants benefiting from the project put up a total of \$95,000 while the Downtown Development Authority came up with another \$75,000. The remaining \$837,681 came from state grants and other funding.

A better view from the water

A second project, which restored the riverfront facades of the same buildings along the boardwalk, cost \$207,500 and resulted in dramatic aesthetic improvements to those businesses upon its completion in 2007. Half of the funding came from state grants, with the rest coming from local merchants and the Portland DDA.

ABOUT PORTLAND

The final 3,000-foot-long section of a river trail system is scheduled to be completed in August. The nearly nine miles of asphalt-paved trails form a loop that surrounds Portland's city limits.

Historical note: The gravestone of Chief Okemos of the Chippewa Indian tribe is in Danby Township, just outside Portland. It is visible from a steep embankment along the Grand River not far from the school bus turnaround at the south end of Okemos Road. Follow a little trail about 200 yards to the east from there.

Natural facts:

- The Grand River flows from south to north in a sinuous course through the Portland area. It is fed by the Looking Glass River, one of seven major tributaries, forming a junction at the edge of downtown.
- The Portland Dam shuts down for 10 days in April each year to permit smolt — juvenile salmon — to migrate downstream on their way to Lake Michigan. If not, the fish would get ground up in the powerful turbines.

- The Kent Street Bridge, which has been restored and moved from its original location just outside of town to its current location over the Grand River, next to I-96, is an example of a pin-connected Parker Truss metal bridge with a distinctive arch shape. It is one of just three such historic structures left in Michigan.

The building the Uries own was erected in 1872. State grants from the Main Street and Cool Cities designations helped make it possible for them to construct a second loft apartment, which they use as a rental property.

“We had to use historically accurate colors because these are historic buildings,” Wanda Urie said. “The facades of the back of the buildings are so much better. It used to be such an eyesore.”

Sondra Jeffrey, who owns a business just around the corner from the boardwalk, said the foot traffic at the Chocolate Moose ice cream parlor, 116 E. Bridge St., has picked up since the completion of the boardwalk and riverfront facade projects.

She said they enhance the expansive trail system that already had helped bring more people into downtown.

Both projects have helped Portland survive the recession. Portland City Manager Thomas Dempsey touts a 96 percent occupancy rate among downtown building owners.

“I think it’s paying dividends right now,” Dempsey said of the improvements along the riverfront. “If we hadn’t taken steps to preserve those buildings, some of those businesses would not be there.

“Portland takes great pride in supporting itself and its businesses. We’ve put a lot of effort into creating a sense of place here — a place where people can gather. Portland is very proud of its community and its heritage.”

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