

Old Town looking at ecotourism options on river

Bangor Daily News 3.29.07 P.B.-4

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OLD TOWN — Combining the history of the river and rich culture that defines the Old Town region, the city is embarking on a new economic development endeavor that it hopes to launch this summer.

The idea is being dubbed a "cultural-ecotourism opportunity" by city officials and is a link to the Penobscot River Restoration Project to revitalize the Penobscot River and its recreational and natural uses.

"It gives us an opportunity and a setting to describe the history and the culture of the

river," City Manager Peggy Daigle said Wednesday. "The river was really the I-95 of its time."

The first phase of Old Town's plan to create a guided kayak and canoe tour leaving from Old Town's boat landing and traveling up the river to Indian and Orson Islands can be completed before the restoration project is finished, Daigle said.

She said she's hoping to kick off the effort during the city's Canoe Hullabaloo celebration this summer.

Details haven't been completed, but there are numerous opportunities to start small and slowly grow the program and

extend it to other towns along the river, she said. Daigle added that completion of the river restoration endeavor will create additional opportunities for ecotourism throughout the region.

"Primarily, it's the best opportunity to have a living classroom," she said.

As part of the restoration project, a nonprofit organization, the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, has been working diligently to raise money and awareness of the plan to remove the Old Town Great Works dam and the Veazie dam in the next five years.

In addition, a bypass is pro-

posed to be built around the Howland dam, and the Orono dam is slated for improvements. The Stillwater Dam already has seen an energy increase as part of the project with a water level rise of 1 foot above it.

About \$10 million was earmarked in President Bush's proposed fiscal year 2008 budget for the Penobscot River restoration effort. The project already has \$4.5 million in private funds, and the state is committed to providing \$3 million to \$5 million to help communities in the region strengthen their connections with the river.

Old Town's first ecotourism phase can be implemented with

little monetary investment and can be done before the dam is removed by containing the guided tours above the Milford dam, around Orson and Indian islands.

"It's just making sure we've got the right partners," Daigle said, adding that Old Town Canoe and community organizations, such as the River Coalition, have shown interest. There also is the possibility of involving the University of Maine.

"Old Town and Old Town Canoe are one and the same," Daigle said. "It's reasonable to expect that Old Town Canoe would be a partner."

The tour would begin on

Fourth Street, where the city owns two buildings that Daigle plans to convert into a walk-through timeline of sorts where visitors can learn about the history, culture and ecology of the area.

"They can enter and self-educate themselves," Daigle said. After traveling up the river, participants would stop for a picnic on city-owned land, formerly known as the Cutler property, just above Socks Island.

"It's a nonconsumptive use of the river," Daigle said. "When they come back on land, they just have a deeper understanding of what the area and state of Maine are about."