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Commentary: A waterfront idea whose time is now

Mike Lizotte may not look like a visionary. But the mild-mannered, soft-spoken scientist, director of the Aquatic Research Laboratory and professor of biology and ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, has a visionary idea that could transform our city's waterfront and benefit the city, state and region.

The idea: Build a waterfront education center that would focus on the Lake Winnebago System and connect this downtown center via the planned river walk and bicycle trail to the university, Oshkosh Public Museum, Paine arboretum and the WIOUWASH Trail. The center would have permanent exhibits that tell the story of the lake system's rich geologic, social and cultural history, as well as temporary exhibits, lectures, and educational and entertainment programs.

"There are so many stories to be told from the lake's glacial history to the many uses people have made of the waterway," said Lizotte, who cites as an example the fact that Lake Winnebago is the largest lake sturgeon fishery in North America.

"The sturgeon have been sustainably managed here for decades. How that happens is amazing. Another huge success story is how we have tackled the problems of chemical pollution in the waterways that were rampant 30 years ago. The fact that we got control of that enormous challenge tells us we can solve today's problems, such as invasive species."

There already exists a wealth of information and artifacts from private and public resources to create such a center, says Lizotte, including the DNR, state geological service, State Historical Society, area museums, and other local sources.

Lizotte envisions panels with pictures and maps, similar to those found in state and national parks, placed along the waterfront trail, showing geological and historical features including the horizon as it was a hundred years ago. Information about existing structures could also be integrated into the trail, such as the remnants of wooden pilings in the area known as Boom Bay on the WIOUWASH Trail, which mark the area where millions of logs were corralled before being sent on to "Sawdust City's" nearly 50 sawmills and wood-based manufacturing plants.

"Getting acquainted with history can be a much more powerful experience," said Lizotte, "when you're actually standing there seeing the changes that have taken place over time."

Lizotte's idea would give coherence to, and enhance, the city's current plan for a downtown river walk and would link into several existing walking trails and institutions all of which have something unique to offer.

A similar mix of integrated resources has been successful in revitalizing Burlington, Vermont, a city smaller than Oshkosh, where a combination museum/aquarium/nature center focused on Lake Champlain, operates as the nexus of a network of related efforts associated with that lake. Called ECHO, the center was 10 years in the making and annually welcomes thousands of visitors.

The Lake Champlain project and a local example, the reconstruction of the Fox Locks, provide a guide for funding the proposed center: a mix of federal, state and local government funds in partnership with private sources.

Lizotte's visionary idea has the advantage of being eminently do-able and can be accomplished in phases. But it does require setting aside a parcel of land on the waterfront now and marshaling the political will to see the plan through.

This re-imagining of our beautiful waterfront has the potential to make our city a much better place to live and a much more attractive place to visit. Just as the EAA Museum highlights the importance of Oshkosh to aviation, bringing to our city tourists and aviation aficionados from near and far, the lake education center would be a magnet attracting tourists and lake enthusiasts of all kinds.

I say, "Let's get started!"

Northwestern community columnist Mary Hiles is a professional writer and editor who held positions at UW-Madison and UW-Oshkosh, where she was editor of Community magazine.