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## Becoming mainstream: The rise of river recreation in Bartow

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10 Jul 2015 | Written by [Brandon Davis](#) | Published in [News](#) |

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When you think “water recreation” in Cartersville and Bartow County, what comes to mind?

Perhaps a summer afternoon at the Dellinger Park pool or an outing on a pontoon boat on Lake Allatoona fills your consciousness. But lately, the local area is seeing an increase in kayaking and other activities along the Etowah River.

“We have never carried kayaks before [2015] on the new side,” said Mark Strickland, owner of Play It Again Sports at Cherokee Place in Cartersville. “So every year it seemed like we ran out of used kayaks right when the season was getting started. So when we went to our last Play It Again Sports trade show, we decided to invest in buying new ones. And that was in February, and we received our first shipment in March. And now we’ve done four orders, and the orders



SKIP BUTLER/The Daily Tribune News David Dreisbach prepares to launch his kayak Friday morning at a ramp off Euharlee Road.

just keep getting bigger and bigger.”

This sudden popularity came as a surprise to Strickland, who said he had never seen the water vessels sail out the door so quickly.

“This is our first year doing it, but we picked a good time to get started because it seems like it’s really blown up this year. We’ve always had calls for kayaks, but this year it’s been really kind of crazy. We were really surprised at how popular the kayaks were,” he explained.

But why has there been such a sudden jump in demand? According to Coosa River Basin Initiative Executive Director David Tucker, it’s likely because the Etowah River has become vastly more accessible in recent years.

“I think part of the popularity is because we have, as one of our goals ..., to actually build more access to the river. It used to be very difficult to get to the river,” he noted. “If you did, you had to cross over private property. If you didn’t go to private property, if you went down beside bridges, it was very hard and treacherous to get down to the water. And so we [CRBI and other related organizations] have really made a concerted effort ... to make sure that water access was good, easy and clean.”

And the fruits of that effort have been apparent. In May, the river

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launch site at Neel's Landing, located at U.S. Highway 411 and Macedonia Road, was opened through the combined efforts of CRBI and Bartow County. Prior to that, the city of Cartersville opened its Leake Mounds Site on State Route 113. Now, there are at least six launch sites located throughout Bartow County.

Cartersville Parks and Recreation Department Director Greg Anderson said the sites were built with funds obtained from the state to provide citizens better access to the Etowah River Water Trail.

"What started us [developing water entry sites], was a [Department of Natural Resources] grant, a recreational trails grant," he explained.

"But this was the first time that we had done something that wasn't really a walking trail, it was a water trail."

Anderson said the city had previously obtained grants from 2003 to 2012 to complete projects such as the walking trail at Sam Smith Park and the second phase of the Pettit Creek Trail. Recently, he noted, the city has met with stakeholders of the Etowah River Water Trail — which extends along a 163-mile span from Floyd County to Lumpkin County — as part of a coalition to create greater availability of access along the waterway. And now, greater accessibility has translated into greater demand, even transcending traditional demographics.

"We've seen the age of the folks that are asking for [kayaks] has kind of dropped, too. We used to see kind of folks in their 20s and 30s, 40s, doing it. Now, we'll get a lot of teenagers coming buying kayaks," said Strickland.

Since the area of the river that runs through Bartow County does not contain any dangerous rapids, it allows a greater number of people to travel safely along it.

"Here in Bartow, it's a very good paddling river for a family," said Anderson.

With increased access to the river comes rising concerns that its natural state may be disturbed. Anderson doesn't believe those concerned have anything to worry about.

"We're interested in conservation. We're interested in protecting the river. And people will say, 'Well, you're putting more people on it, and

that's dangerous to do that because they're going to tear it up.' Well, we think it's going to be right the opposite effect — with the people that use that are the ones that care about it, and in return, they will take care of it," he said.

Tucker agrees. He said that, before accessibility was increased, people often took off-road vehicles such as trucks and ATVs to the river and destroyed the banks. Now, with an increasingly conscious group of people visiting the river, it may be safer than ever.

"The awareness of the river, the use of the river, has actually protected our rivers," said Tucker.

CRBI hosts group river paddles on multiple rivers throughout the year. The next one on the Etowah River, the Indian Mound Paddle, will take place Aug. 1. For more information, visit <http://www.coosa.org/>. To learn more about the Etowah River Water Trail as a whole, go to <http://www.etowahwatertrail.org/>.

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