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David L. Lacroix kayaks down the Spicket River in North Lawrence. He recently paddled from Central Catholic High School to the Great Stone Dam to show the potential of the Spicket and Merrimack rivers as recreational resources.

He only sees potential

◆ Efforts are under way to look at cleaning and creating recreational opportunities along the Spicket and Merrimack rivers.

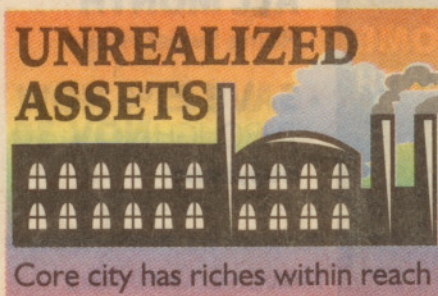
By Shawn Regan
Eagle-Tribune Writer

LAWRENCE — Trudging along the banks of the Spicket River with his blue kayak "Swiftly" in tow, David L. Lacroix can't stop singing its praises.

The river, which winds for almost three miles through the city and cuts through the heavily populated Arlington and North Common neighborhoods, is in most places hidden and obstructed.

But instead of the bags of garbage strewn all around, large pieces of metal scattered along the shoreline, and 8-foot chain-link fences guarding its banks, Lacroix sees only potential.

"The water looks and smells clean," he yelled to shore, paddling at the base of a waterfall in a pooling area where the Spicket and the North Canal converge near the mouth of the Merrimack River.



A series follow-up

"It's clear to the bottom in most places. And there are lots of small bait fish."

Last week, Lacroix, who sells and leases medical equipment out of the KGR mill building along the North Canal, set out with Diane Collier, an artist at Essex Street Art Center, to paddle the Lawrence sweep of the Spicket River in a kayak.

In the city, the Spicket flows from the Gateway district to the Methuen border, meandering though North Lawrence, from Stevens Pond, behind Malden Mills, to Marston and Canal streets.

Lacroix and Collier entered the river at the city's only access point behind Central Catholic High School. Further

upstream at the mouth of the Merrimack River, they paddled another mile to the Great Stone Dam. The journey took about two hours.

"The Spicket has never been evaluated to see if it is viable for recreational use, rather than just caging it up with a fence," Lacroix said. "In my opinion the fence hasn't stopped people from dumping stuff into the river, either. But it has stopped anyone from trying to clean it. I'd love to see the fence taken down, at least in a few places where we could provide access to a rejuvenated river someday."

Now that he has successfully and easily navigated the river, Lacroix, a novice kayaker, hopes his trip will help launch a grassroots effort to restore the river to its former glory.

"People always want to say bad things about Lawrence and the Spicket, but I see the river as just a neglected waterway that could be easily cleaned," he said. "Much like the city's old mills, I see the Spicket and the Merrimack as underutilized assets; resources where inner city kids could learn to kayak in an urban

Kayaker: Cleaning rivers is his priority

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setting without traveling to New Hampshire.”

Marianne E. Paley, executive director of GroundWorks Lawrence, a nonprofit organization that provides planning and technical assistance aimed at building parks and a path linking parks and green spaces along the city's waterways, said Lacroix's trip proved there are recreational opportunities along the Spicket and Merrimack rivers.

“Dave's trip was phenomenal,” said Paley, whose office is next door to Lacroix's in the KGR building. “We tend to think of the Spicket as

dangerous, as a public health hazard, and as a flooding hazard in the Arlington area. But Dave has challenged us to look at the river as a possible amenity for the city.”

Paley said GroundWorks Lawrence is involved in a variety of endeavors affecting the rivers, such as monitoring water quality, inspecting nearby storm drains, and inventorying plants and animals living near the rivers.

GroundWorks Lawrence has a variety of funding sources including the federal Environmental Protection Agency, business donations, fund-raising campaigns, and the city

coffers, which could be tapped for projects along the waterways, Paley said.

But before anything can be done, Paley said city officials would have to be brought into the discussion and, most importantly, residents who live along its banks would have to be consulted.

“We would love to get input from people who live along the Spicket for where they think there are opportunities to access and use the river,” she said.

“The fences keep people out,” she said. “But to take them down, we need to give people a reason to

engage the river. I'm not advocating removing all the fences, but we could remove some if the neighbors wanted.”

Lacroix said he envisions Boy Scouts or neighborhoods enlisting to clean and “adopt” portions of the river.

“There are a lot of great things going on in Lawrence today to bring the city back to the days when it was great,” said Lacroix, who was born in Lawrence and now lives in Salem, N.H. “Other communities like Salem have cleaned up the Spicket and created wonderful recreational areas. I don't see why we couldn't do it too.”