

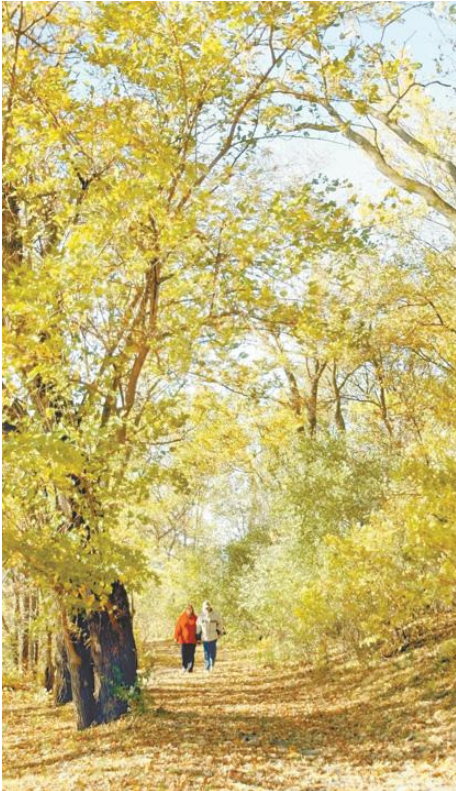
Quad-City Labyrinth Project

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Hundreds to hit the trails

By Kay Luna | Sunday, October 15, 2006 Quad City Times



John Schultz/QUAD-CITY TIMES Mickey Carter and Barry Sprott of Moline take a brisk walk on a fall afternoon through the trails on Sylvan Island. Local trails could be busy places this week as the 18th annual National Trails Symposium comes to the Quad-Cities.

It was no accident that the Quad-Cities landed a huge national convention, spotlighting the area's extensive recreational trails.

Just like the long-sought creation of those trail systems, it took dogged determination — and several years — to land the 18th annual National Trails Symposium this week at the River Center/Adler Theatre in downtown Davenport.

The big payoff: A total of about 800 visitors, including attendees and volunteers, from all over the country landing in the Quad-Cities, spending an estimated \$750,000 to \$1 million on hotel rooms, dining out and other tourist activities.

And that's not all.

Thousands of glossy informational packets mailed out about the event in the Quad-Cities, and the visitors themselves, will give the Quad-Cities national exposure that couldn't be captured without the convention's help, said Joe Taylor, president and chief executive officer of the Quad-Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau.

“We're certainly getting notice from around the nation that the Quad-Cities is here and definitely on the radar screen,” he said. “This is really the Congress of trail building in the United States.”

Another impressive point: the Quad-Cities just might draw more to this conference than the symposium did in metropolitan Austin, Texas, just two years ago.

If the conference draws 600 participants, that would be a record-breaking event, with an estimated indirect economic impact of \$1.5 million — on top of the dollars directly spent in relation to the conference, Taylor said.



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Symposium draws trail advocates

The symposium, hosted by the California-based American Trails group, officially runs Thursday through Sunday, drawing walkers, bikers and hikers from all across the country.

It will bring representatives from the Department of Natural Resources from all 50 states — along with other federal, state and local officials. Others involved in trails, including trail coordinators, engineers, contractors, landscape architects, surveyors and marketing officials, also are expected to attend, Taylor said.

Not only will speakers and forums be held inside the conference center, but participants also will be invited to visit — and use — the area's recreational trails and other sites.

For instance, an event to show participants how to build trails with heavy equipment is scheduled at Deere & Co.'s demonstration site in Moline. Canoe trips, bike rides and even an ATV ride and safety course will be held at other sites. Those locations include the Black Hawk State Historical Site in Rock Island, Maquoketa Caves, Arsenal Island and Credit Island, among others.

Some plan to arrive before the conference begins — some as early as today — to hold other meetings related to trails development, Taylor added.

Pam Gluck, executive director of American Trails, said about 500 participants have enrolled for the conference so far, and more are getting added to the list every day. There also will be about 175 volunteers working at the event, she added.

“That’s a pretty good impact on the hotels here locally in the Quad-Cities,” said Brent McRae, general manager of LaQuinta hotel in Moline, and president of the Quad-Cities Lodging Association. “Anytime we can have an event like this, it’s definitely a positive impact on the hotel industry, both on the Iowa and Illinois side of the river.”

Why the Quad-Cities?

So, how did the Quad-Cities end up with the event?

Taylor said it all comes down to his agency being “savvy enough to market the Quad-Cities,” knowing that landing a convention is competitive business that’s worth pursuing.

He said the bureau goes after lesser-known conferences because the Quad-Cities then stands a better chance of winning them — instead of competing against hundreds of larger communities, Taylor said.



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So, when the bureau heard about the trails symposium in 2000, Taylor sent staff members to the event in Redding, Calif., to see what it was like. That was the first step in developing relationships with the convention's leaders, he said.

The Quad-Cities then bid on the event in 2002 and 2004, and lost both times.

But in 2003, the leader of the conference, Gluck, finally visited the area for the first time, and decided this would be the host location for the 2006 symposium.

Gluck credits local tourism officials' determination for getting her to the area, saying she "fell in love" with the Quad-Cities and its trail system. She called the trails "world class."

"I love the way the five cities and all of your counties and the two states all work together so that your trail system is seamless," Gluck said. "You can be anywhere on the river trail and you have those wonderful way-finding stations and information kiosks. There are just some of the nicest way-finding stations I've seen in the country."

The art along the recreational trails, and beautiful views along the Mississippi River, also caught her attention, she said.

Another interesting facet: Many trails in the Quad-Cities overlap and connect in state and national trails, including the Great River Trail, the Grand Illinois Trail and the American Discovery Trail, she said.

"You have a real jewel there in your trail system, and boy, you can sure tell that your people love it," Gluck said. "I always see people out there on the trails."

The symposium is held every two years, and the location changes each time to various cities around the country. It will be held in 2008 in Little Rock, Ark.; the 2010 session will be in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Not only is the conference meant to teach people how to build and manage sustainable trails, but it's also a way to "bring the trails community together, so we can learn how to work together and how to respect one another," Gluck said.

"It's actually to show people how to put trails on the ground, to showcase how there are successful partnerships in the Quad-Cities," she added. "We're really showcasing what you've done, and our people will be learning from those success stories."

She said the group also will leave something behind for the Quad-Cities: A national, and international, perspective about the issue.



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For example, the keynote speaker, Gil Penalosa, is president of Walk and Bike for Life in Ontario, Canada, and has done “amazing things with trails,” especially in Bogota, Colombia, Gluck said. She called him a “world-class trail leader.”

Penalosa will be given a bike to ride along the trails during his visit to the Quad-Cities, and is expected to give city and county leaders some ideas to improve the pathways, and compliments about what’s right about the trail systems.

“We’re exposing your trail managers and advocates and city leaders to the state of the art on trails,” Gluck said.

Denise Bulat, executive director of the Bi-State Regional Commission in Rock Island, said trails are extremely important to the area, not only as a quality-of-life issue, but a tourism draw. People from as far away as Wisconsin and other states call Bulat’s office all the time, asking about the area’s trails, she said.

Taylor said it simply: “There are so many issues that pull communities apart, but trails connect people and places.

“I think local residents take for granted that a trail crosses the Mississippi River, but these are lessons other communities can learn from. With our trails, we’re leaders, not followers.”

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Symposium

When the 18th National Trails Symposium hits the Quad-Cities this week, a public kick-off event will be held Thursday at the RiverCenter in downtown Davenport.

The event, which is free, will be 3-6:30 p.m. in the south exhibit hall. On display will be more than 100 trail-related exhibits as well as other family activities. More than 30 recreation and outdoor-related organizations will have free table-top displays and make-and-take activities.

The Bug Zoo from Iowa State University will be 4:30-6:30 p.m. A 42-foot, 5-circuit labyrinth will be in the exhibit hall.

The symposium runs from Thursday to Sunday at the RiverCenter.

For more information, visit the American Trails Web site at



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