

Reconsider Arkansas River access plan  
BY WALLY SEIBEL

Kayaking is one of the fastest-growing outdoor recreational activities, both nationally and locally. Fifteen years ago, when I purchased my first kayak, none was available at a retail store in Wichita. Today, a number of stores have dozens of styles and models on display at prices as low as several hundred dollars.

I conduct frequent no-cost Arkansas River Coalition river appreciation floats on sections of the river from Raymond, Kan., to Traders Bend at Kaw Lake in Oklahoma. My records show that on more than 50 floats in the past few years, more than 900 people have enjoyed a day on the river with a lunch break on a sandbar and, for some, overnight camping. Participants range in age from 6 to nearly 80. These floats always launch and take out on public property, frequently bridge sites, which are sometimes more difficult and less safe than they could and should be.

Articles in The Eagle have detailed the strain on park budgets in the current economic downturn ("Parks lose as prisons cut back," Feb. 15, and "Parks use leaps as funding shrinks," March 31). The Arkansas River is free and requires no additional maintenance due to recreational use. The cost of providing access points to the river would be a fraction of the cost of bike path and park construction and maintenance, which in themselves are a bargain.

The main opposition to the river-access plan appears to be from a few landowners whose strident, organized opposition is not representative of most. On occasions when I have needed access between available public access points, I have visited farmers who graciously offered access and suggested neighbors who may have a more suitable site. I believe that these people, who are not heard from at Sedgwick County Commission meetings, are more representative.

Opponents seem to fall into two categories. One is the property rights ideologue who claims "the river is mine" -- which it is not -- "and you stay far away." The second is the landowner who has had problems with trespassing, which is a valid concern.

I am certain that the negative impact of our floats on property adjacent to or on the river has been absolutely nil and is typical of canoe and kayak activity on the river. The paddler has no incentive to trespass on adjacent property.

The Arkansas River is a navigable river, which means that the public has access to the high-water mark. A question often raised is: Where is the high-water mark? For the paddler, this is absolutely a nonissue, because all out-of-boat activity, such as rest breaks and camping, happens on sandbars, which are manifestly below the high-water mark.

Trespassing problems are caused by other users and should be dealt with by law enforcement. It may be relatively easy in some outdoor activities to cross property lines -- ATVs and high wheelers can go almost anywhere, including onto private property. Paddlers require only a public place to park vehicles and a path to the river. Restricting access that is suitable for canoe and kayak launching simply will not alleviate problems with trespassers.

Sedgwick County commissioners: Do the right thing and reconsider your position on the Arkansas River Corridor Access Plan.

[Wally Seibel, an ARC board member, lives in Wichita and coordinates the ARC float trips.]