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Celebrate the Fox focuses on river history, revitalization

Community event Saturday will feature walking tours

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Fratello's Waterfront Restaurant (from left), the Atlas Coffee Mill and the Paper Discovery Museum are located along the Fox River in downtown Appleton. The Celebrate the Fox community event, including a "Taste of the Fox," which features appetizers and refreshments from restaurants along the Fox River, will take place from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday. / Dan Powers/The Post-Crescent

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Written by Michael King Post-Crescent staff writer

APPLETON — Long known as the Appleton industrial flats, the low-lying land along the Fox River in the central part of the city is in the midst of a renaissance and renewed redevelopment [focus](#).

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The stretch of river from the Memorial Drive bridge to the College Avenue bridge was once home to several paper mills, contributing to the term "Paper Valley" since the Lower Fox River was once recognized as having the world's largest concentration of papermakers.

Today, the riverfront is turning a new page in its history with old mills and other buildings being refurbished or demolished to make way for new opportunities.

'Celebrate the Fox' at a glance

What: Celebrate the Fox community event, including a "Taste of the Fox" featuring appetizers and

Riverfront rebirth

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refreshments from restaurants along the Fox River
 When: 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday
 Where: 425 W. [Water](#) St., Appleton (river level of the Historic Atlas Mill)
 Details: The free event includes live music, [food](#), refreshments, exhibits of Fox River-related artwork, original paintings, historical displays and guided walking tours highlighting the river's history and future.
 Restaurants participating in the "Taste of the Fox" are: Atlas Coffee Mill and Café, Fratellos Waterfront Restaurant, Michiels Fox Banquets & Rivertyme Catering, Pullmans Restaurant, Nan Sorellas, Trolley Square Waterfront Banquets and Stone Cellar Brewpub. Pianist Noah Harmon will entertain from 1 to 3 p.m. as part of the Riverbeat music series. while a Lawrence

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"The riverfront is undergoing a rebirth of sorts, and there is a new appreciation for what it has to offer," said Kathleen Lhost, executive director of the Paper Discovery Center inside the historic Atlas Mill, a 133-year-old former [Kimberly-Clark Corp.](#) paper mill that has been restored and adapted to new uses, including offices, a coffee shop-café-gift shop-art gallery with a riverfront deck and the Paper Industry International Hall of Fame.

On Saturday, the nonprofit Paper Discovery Center, a science and technology center that highlights the river's rich papermaking history, will be ground zero for a new community event: Celebrate the Fox.

"What a great way to celebrate the past, present and future of the Fox," said Christine Williams, vice president of the Appleton Historical Society, which has organized a river art exhibit and guided walking history tours with residents of the Old Third Ward neighborhood that will be part of the new event.

The event also will include the inaugural "Taste of the Fox" where nearby restaurants offer appetizers and refreshments.

"It is the perfect time to celebrate its rich history, natural beauty, unique riverfront restaurants and vibrant neighborhoods," said Lhost, who also is the head of the Paper Industry International Hall of Fame.

"The river is just such an asset for this community and people are not aware of it," she said. "The history between the two bridges (College Avenue and Memorial Drive) of Appleton is just amazing."

New vibe

Karen Harkness, Appleton's community development director, said there's a new vibe taking place in the flats as a mixed-use district emerges with new housing, including single-family townhomes at RiverHeath and multi-family housing at Eagle Flats, as well as plans for additional commercial and office uses amongst the existing businesses.

"We don't want the industry that's down there now to go away," Harkness said. "That's part of the charm of the new development that's happening. You're building a new neighborhood to integrate with existing neighborhoods along our waterway."

Harkness said construction will begin soon on two four-story apartment buildings in the first phase of Eagle Flats, on the site of the former Riverside Paper.

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Riverwalk Place is a 70-unit complex being built by the Appleton Housing Authority to replace housing for senior and disabled residents who will be relocated from the aging Washington Place complex downtown. Meanwhile, The Landings is a 54-unit market rate apartment complex at Eagle Flats.

Further down river, River Heath is poised to break ground by early August with the first of seven energy-efficient townhomes on the site of a former paper mill and hydroelectric plant. Ultimately, plans call for the 15-acre, \$55 million development to have 178 residential units and 114,500 square feet of commercial space.

Pedestrian-friendly environment

Harkness is among the Appleton officials negotiating with Canadian National Railway in hopes of getting the railroad to donate two trestles and two pedestrian crossings that will help extend the Newberry Trail and make connections between Lutz [Park](#) and Vulcan Heritage Park, next to Fratellos.

She thinks that will help create a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly environment in an emerging restaurant-entertainment district that soon will see boating traffic passing through when the four historic, hand-operated Appleton locks that have been refurbished open in 2012.

"Water in general is a draw," said Harkness. "For so many years we only viewed our waterways as an asset to our industry and a way to grow our industrial base. If you look at waterfront development across the U.S. in the last seven to 10 years, you'll see a real increase in growth and redevelopment along our waterways."

Appleton has a vibrant downtown sitting on the north riverbank and Harkness thinks there will be improved connectivity with the riverfront as development occurs.

The downtown trolley, a refurbished former street [car](#), currently provides a historical link by making a 20-minute loop between the downtown and riverfront destinations like Fratellos-Atlas Coffee Mill and Café, Pullmans at Trolley Square and Stone Cellar Brewpub in the Between the Locks complex. It runs from 5 to 11 p.m. on Thursday and Friday evenings and from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. on Saturdays.

"Redevelopment and intrigue with the river has really been an ongoing phenomenon for at least 30 years," said Pete Hensler, a long-time Friends of the Fox official and former Appleton economic development director.

Transition from industrial to mixed use began in the 1980s when Madison developer Randy Alexander converted three old paper mill buildings built between 1883 and 1915 to the Historic Fox River Mills apartments and townhomes on the north bank of the river.

"Now fast forward to today and we've had considerable success with reuse/redevelopment projects that have created critical mass for public enjoyment," Hensler said. "In addition, almost every project has had a brownfield component so in addition to creating

places and spaces we've cleaned up sites that would not have been cleaned up otherwise."

A paddling enthusiast, Hensler also has been involved in the creation of the Fox-Wisconsin water trail. Over the past two years, new portages have been built and directional-safety signage installed around the four refurbished Appleton locks.

Hensler said the Fox River System Navigational Authority already has placed some dock space along the navigational canal walls so boaters can disembark and walk to restaurants nearby when the locks open next year.

Heritage parkway initiative

Lhost said the Fox-Wisconsin Heritage Parkway initiative is helping to preserve the past and provide a future with greater public access to the river.

"The Fox River is one of the most important rivers in the country because of its link to Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet, and their voyage from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico in 1673," she said.

Another potential redevelopment site next to the Atlas mill is the former city water plant that has been demolished.

"Depending on who you talk to there's all sorts of ideas for what to do on that water treatment plant site from having an [ice cream stand](#) to little shops to an outdoor theater," Lhost said. "We're hoping it's some kind of green space.

"We'd like to see the riverfront to become kind of a destination area for people of the Fox Valley to come and hang out, walk and admire the scenery."

Admiring the brick and stonework in the former K-C Atlas mill, Lhost said, "I understand you can't save everything but I think when they are able to save historic buildings and repurpose them, everybody wins."

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