**Showcasing the DNR: Roger W. Morrison estate funds Sumac Island boat launch expansion in Huron County**

*How one important DNR improvement project came to be*

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Saginaw Bay is a hotspot for anglers, hunters and water recreation enthusiasts.

Over the last decade, anglers annually spent about 1 million total hours fishing on the bay’s Lake Huron waters. When you combine that with recreational boating and waterfowl hunting, it is no surprise there is a desire to improve boating access sites around the rim of the bay.

It is challenging to acquire land and create brand-new access points, so projects improving current access are more feasible.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources Fisheries, Wildlife and Parks and Recreation divisions worked together recently to make improvements at one such site on Saginaw Bay, after users expressed a need for enhancements.

Within the DNR Fisheries Division, the Statewide Angler Survey Program hires creel clerks to gather catch information and other data from anglers, which helps department staff manage fisheries across the state.

In addition to fisheries data, the clerks also receive more general comments from the angling public. In the 2022 end-of-year write-ups, one of the local creel clerks for Saginaw Bay said anglers, boaters and hunters they interacted with over the creel season would like to see the Sumac Island boat launch expanded from one to two lanes.

They said the enhancement would improve traffic flow and reduce congestion at the boat ramp.

Over the winter of 2022, this idea was shared among local Fisheries, Wildlife and Parks and Recreation division staffers. While everyone agreed this was a good project addressing a well-known issue, funding the project was going to be the biggest hurdle.

Operation and maintenance of over 1,300 state-owned boating access sites is handled by the Parks and Recreation Division, and budgets at the local level could not take on the cost of expanding this boat launch.

Everything changed in the summer of 2023.

The Roger W. Morrison Estate donated money to the DNR, directing that the funds be used to protect, improve and purchase wild places in support of hunting and fishing, protecting clean water and stocking game fish.

A portion of those funds became available in June 2023, and a proposal to expand the Sumac Island boating access site fit the criteria. Saginaw Bay is a wild place, and funding this project would help improve access for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation activities.

The expansion project was one of five projects selected for funding. This allowed the DNR Fisheries Division to purchase the materials to expand the launch, while the DNR Parks and Recreation Division supplied the machinery and labor to do the work.

The launch expansion was completed in June 2024, and in addition to increasing the number of launch lanes, the existing concrete ramp planks were repurposed at the site to provide an additional paddling and winter access ramp.

Everything looked good, and the site continued to get heavy use, but there was another problem remaining – there were no lights.

This is where the DNR Wildlife Division stepped in to help. Local staffers provided utility poles and solar lights to illuminate the area. The boating access site is now well lit and provides a much-needed benefit that was originally overlooked.

The location of the Sumac Island boating access site is ideal for anglers, paddlers and waterfowl hunters.

The emergent and submergent vegetation along the east side of Saginaw Bay holds big numbers of largemouth bass. This area has been a focal point in recent years for professional bass anglers competing in national tournaments.

The vegetation in this area also provides excellent cover for panfish, and Master Angler Award-sized black crappie over 14 inches are caught each year along the east side of Saginaw Bay.

Bowfishing anglers are drawn to this area as well, and the addition of a solar light was a simple improvement that helps them after a long night of chasing common carp, bowfin and longnose gar.

Paddlers will also appreciate the improvements at this boating access site.

The updated access ramp at the north end of the parking lot is used for launching and retrieving kayaks and canoes during the open-water months, and the ramp provides the primary ice access during winter.

As paddling enthusiasts venture out into Saginaw Bay, they are well protected from most of the high winds and waves due to the vast wetland complex that exists west and north of the area.

This extensive labyrinth to explore can keep kayakers and canoeists paddling for hours, providing excellent opportunities to view a variety of shorebirds and other wildlife.

Waterfowl hunters benefit from the changes to the site as well.

Increasing the number of launch lanes helps reduce congestion, and the solar light makes launching and loading easier. The east side of Saginaw Bay hosts resident ducks for hunters to target and is also a stopping point for migrating diving ducks.

This project brought together three DNR divisions for the common good.

We kept an open mind to work through the hurdles of permitting, and we were confident this project would be competitive for funding possibilities whenever they became available.

The interconnectedness across divisions was pivotal to completing this work, and we learned together how to improve the process for next time.

Local DNR staffers are committed to improving more boat launches in the future and will continue to address the needs of our users to provide quality access sites around Saginaw Bay.

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