

Parking's now free for Pirates games, if you're kayaking

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By Bob Batz Jr., Post-Gazette Staff Writer

You now can paddle to a Pirates game and park your kayak or canoe securely on the shore.

One of several steel kayak racks slated for the city's riverfronts was completed yesterday on the North Shore at the base of the Roberto Clemente Bridge, where there is a ramp suitable for landing and launching such nonmotorized watercraft.

The paint should be dry and the facility open for use starting tomorrow. Two more racks are to be built on public property this summer -- another on the Allegheny River at 40th Street in Lawrenceville and one on the Monongahela River at South Side Riverfront Park. The first rack already is up on the Allegheny at Millvale, but while the new Three Rivers Rowing Association boathouse complex is being constructed, it's not easily accessible yet - - at least not from land.

Together, the four racks are anchors to the Allegheny River Water Trail being developed by the nonprofit Friends of the Riverfront, which plans to add several more racks at launch points along the three rivers.

"Ideally, we'd like to start working with private developers," says John Stephen, executive director of the group, which is implementing the idea that started years ago with a committee of Sustainable Pittsburgh.

The racks were designed for free by architect Rob Pfaffmann, who, in addition to being a Friends of the Riverfront board member, is an active kayaker, including on these Downtown waters. Last year, he paddled to a University of Pittsburgh football game at Heinz Field.

Paddlers aren't as rare Downtown as some might think. Nonprofit groups such as Outside Adventures and the Western Pennsylvania Field Institute regularly run group trips, and there's a robust kayaking program at the Three Rivers Boating Association on Washington's Landing.

But before this, the only official launch in the city that the public could use was the one powerboaters used at South Side Riverfront Park. Pfaffmann and other advocates hope that the new racks will enable and encourage more such people-powered activity.

The racks are being installed by Red Star Ironworks of North Oakland, which fabricated them from steel and plastic pipe. The North Shore rack actually was divided into halves so each could be bolted to the concrete walls beneath the bridge. But usually the racks will be free-standing, and each side will hold three boats, which users can lock up with their own chains or cables. The bright blue corrugated roofs are meant to guide users to the racks, which also are to be marked with signs. There'll be no charge to "park" your boat.

The first round of four racks cost \$25,000, which came from the Richard King Mellon Foundation with help from Friends of the Riverfront. Stephen said the group aims to add

four racks a year as it develops the Allegheny River Water Trail, which extends all the way to Freeport.

Friends of the Riverfront recently received a \$60,000 grant to do additional racks from the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Other planned sites include the boat ramp just outside Heinz Field as well as a suitably sloped bank along River Road near Washington's Landing.

Stephen says the group hopes to interest developers, such as those expanding Station Square, into including -- even sponsoring -- racks and launch points. He envisions the day when people could paddle to the Hard Rock Cafe, to the Strip District, and to many other points of interest up and down the rivers.

Later this year, once the first four racks are in place, the group may publicize them by organizing a Pirates-by-paddle outing.

Water trails, or "blueways" as they're colorfully known, are being developed around the country on rivers, streams and coastlines. Others in this region include the Kiski Water Trail (from Freeport on the Kiski River on up the Conemaugh to Johnstown) and the Yough River Water Trail (on the Youghiogheny from Connellsville in Fayette County to McKeesport).

The Allegheny River Water Trail, which could be tied into other trails, is described on a map brochure available from Friends of the Riverfront. The group, which is holding its triathlon and adventure race on the Allegheny on July 14, can be reached at 412-488-0212.