

# The Argo Cascades Project:

## Turning Structural Challenges into Unique Recreation Opportunities in Ann Arbor

In 2007, the City of Ann Arbor was faced with challenges related to Argo Dam, located on the Huron River on the City's north side. Structural deficiencies had been discovered in the headrace and embankment considered to be part of the dam, and it was clear that repairs would need to be made.

"The vision became one of opportunity," said Colin Smith, Director of Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation. Rather than simply repairing the existing embankment, the City got creative. "How can we address the problem and come out with something that can improve the recreational experience for people at the Huron River? From that question came the Cascades," said Smith.

There has been a canoe livery in some form or fashion at Argo since the late 1800s; today approximately 40,000 people enjoy a river trip or pond paddle at the City's liveries each year. With more than 500 kayaks and canoes for rent, the department operates the largest livery in the state.

Prior to the Cascades project, Argo Canoe Livery was located on a quarter-mile stretch of stagnant water that ended at a concrete wall, a barrier which required visitors to portage down a series of steps with their canoes or kayaks to re-enter the river.

"The portage was a source of great frustration," said Smith. "For many, it was a reason why they either couldn't or wouldn't take our most popular trip, a two hour paddle from Argo to Gallup Park."

Construction on the project began in the Summer of 2011 to create a series of drops and pools that connect Argo Pond to the Huron River. The stretch includes nine drops that fall approximately 10 feet in elevation, eliminating the portage and creating a boat bypass channel. For the first time since 1830 (when the channel was built to power mills), Argo Cascades has returned the section of river to its previous free-flowing status.

More than 500 residents voted online to name the project, now known as the Argo Cascades. Completed in 2012, the development has created "new recreation opportunities with tubes, rafts and kayaks," Smith added. "It provides a bit of thrill with the moving water and drops, but is manageable by people with limited experience and people are thoroughly enjoying it."

The City now offers rafts that can accommodate up to five patrons, "which are great for providing guided nature tours down the Cascades and Huron River," he added. The project also included paving a portion of the Border-to-Border trail that was in poor

condition prior and was not ADA accessible. "The path is extremely popular and you see many people biking, walking and running on it. The Cascades has become a great gathering spot – people watch the activity, have lunch, sit on the rocks by the drops and read or catch some sun. Prior to this project this stretch of river was more of a place one passed through – not somewhere people wanted to linger."

Smith cites community support and dedicated staff as a major component of the project's success. "The staff at the Canoe Liveries has been working extremely hard all season to help make the Cascades a success. Their enthusiasm, professionalism, safety training, and attention to customer service are essential in making the Cascades a great customer experience," said Smith. "Cheryl Saam, the Recreation Facility Supervisor of Gallup and Argo Liveries, realizes the great recreational value the Huron River provides Ann Arbor, and in her ten years at the Liveries has been responsible for its tremendous growth, both in business and popularity. Without the great staff, the Cascades wouldn't be anywhere nearly as successful."

The Cascades has been warmly received by the community. "The City canoe liveries have seen a significant uptick in use and revenue since we opened last May," said Smith. "People who typically came out once a year for a canoe or kayak are telling us they plan on coming every weekend! [The Cascades] has really energized this portion of the river and park system that is so close to downtown Ann Arbor."

To learn more about the Argo Cascades, visit [www.tinyurl.com/ArgoCascades](http://www.tinyurl.com/ArgoCascades).

*Congratulations to Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation, recipients of the MRPA Park Design Award for the Argo Cascades! The award was presented in Lansing during the 2013 MRPA Conference & Trade Show in late February.*

