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Illinois Paddling Council announces city's Whitewater Park

An early Christmas present

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How often has the State of Illinois given you anything? If you are like me, mostly I send them checks; and occasionally, I get a license plate back. But amazingly, we are all about to take delivery on an absolutely wonderful gift, and it comes from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

This gift is located on the Fox River in Yorkville, Ill. It is an expensive gift (best estimate, \$4 million), and it is the result of some creative thinking about how to remediate a killer dam.

The gift is a 1,200-foot-long series of artificial rapids called a whitewater park. Such parks seem to be in fashion these days. Quite a few have been built around the country, but the Midwest is just beginning to catch up.

At least six other cities in the Midwest, including Rockford, Aurora and Montgomery, Ill., Grand Rapids, Mich., St. Louis, Mo., and Kent, Ohio, are all flirting with plans for some kind of whitewater feature, but none has even been started, while Yorkville is practically done.

Two other whitewater parks are relatively close to Illinois—one at Wausau, Wis. and one in South Bend Ind., but both are a significant distance from Illinois, and both are only available on a limited basis. The Yorkville facility will be open 24/7, year-round.

Yorkville is a gift for paddlers, not just because it will be the closest whitewater site for thousands of paddlers, but also because it will have the effect of giving paddling in general a much higher profile in Illinois. This whitewater park should attract a large number of young people to our somewhat aging sport. Here in the heart of the Midwest, we rarely see young people coming into the sport. Yorkville should change that.

We also hope that the whitewater park will help to re-make downtown Yorkville into an economic powerhouse. Besides paddlers, it should attract tubers, rafters and tourists who just want to watch. Everyone will spend money. If that happens, what is good for the Yorkville economy will also be good for Illinois, and the state will get a significant return on its investment through sales tax. Yorkville is a present that will keep on giving, and all we paddlers have to do to make that happen is use it.