

# Luminaria Walk returns to celebrate trail anniversary

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(Photo: TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO)

Twenty-five years ago, John Juras was chairman of the Name the Trail committee back when the River's Edge Trail was merely an idea. The public was invited to submit their suggestions, and 400 area residents responded with 220 name ideas in addition to the six names proposed by the trails committee.

"One of the suggested names for the River's Edge Trail was the "Money Down the River Trail," said Juras, referring to the opposition from community members who worried that tax dollars would be diverted from other needed areas and used for the project.

A quarter century, 57 total miles, 19 trailheads, 15 bridges, six tunnels and 13 underpasses later, Juras, who is now the president of the River's Edge Trail Foundation, said, "We have proven that this trail is anything but that."

"All the funds have come from private donations and grants and in-kind donations – no tax dollars, no city money," River's Edge Trail board member and events coordinator Becky Nelson said. "It's just been an

incredible gift of generosity by many folks making it happen."

Volunteers have put thousands of hours into cleanup, weed control, tree planting, maintenance and enhancement, the City of Great Falls has invested time, energy and money maintaining the parks along the trail and, according to director Joseph Petrella, the overall day-to-day maintenance falls under the scope of the Parks and Recreation Department.

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The River's Edge Trail will be lit from Gibson Park to West Bank Park for the 2016 Luminaria Walk on Saturday. (Photo: TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO)

To celebrate the trail's anniversary, Nelson and her fellow board members are reviving the popular Luminaria Walk, which hasn't been held since 2010.

On Saturday, June 18, 1,000 candles will light a one-mile stretch of the trail from Gibson Park to the West Bank area. From 7 to 11 p.m., food, art and craft vendors will line the pathways, and local musicians – including the Steve Keller Band and 49th Street Blues Project – will provide live entertainment.

"It's just a laid-back free event for anybody who wants to enjoy the river and some music that evening," Nelson said. The Luminaria Walk also winds up the Lewis and Clark Festival being held June 17-19 in Gibson Park.

Nelson often uses the trail as a runner. She said her daughter, Allie, recalls lighting luminarias when Allie was 2 years old. Allie, now 20, attends college at Montana State University in Bozeman.



**Asher Tweet, left, and other members of Katie Finnicum's first-grade class at Meadow Lark Elementary School color paper bags, which will be used for the River's Edge Trail Luminaria Walk on Saturday. (Photo: Courtesy photo/Becky Nelson)**

"She's coming home for it next weekend because she has such fond memories of it," Nelson said.

In preparation for the walk, The River's Edge Trail Foundation is holding a Raise-a-Pint night at Mighty Mo Brewery from 5 to 9 p.m. Monday. Aflac and the Great Falls High School Key Club are sponsoring the fundraiser and will be out front passing out Aflac ducks and greeting trail supporters.

The luminaria bags were decorated last week by first graders at Meadow Lark Elementary School, but at 4 p.m. Wednesday, community members are invited to grab a scoop and stop by the Great Falls Parks and Recreation building to finish preparing the bags for the walk.

"We're just going to take off our shoes and sit in the sand," Nelson said, "and put two cups of sand in every bag and put candles in them to get ready for the night."

Nelson also invites vendors of all kinds to contact her at 899-8642 to participate in Saturday's Luminaria Walk.

Both Nelson and Juras are excited about the future of the River's Edge Trail, which has become a major landmark and attraction for Great Falls.

Juras uses trail to commute to work. In fact, one of his goals is to create better connections into residential neighborhoods for biking and walking commuters. He also rides the trail's extreme mountain bike areas and takes his family for outings in the summer.

"I could go on and on," he said, laughing.



**Students in Katie Finnicum's first-grade class at Meadow Lark Elementary School decorated bags last week that will be filled with sand Wednesday for the Luminaria Walk on the River's Edge Trail on Saturday. (Photo: Courtesy photo/Becky Nelson)**

For Juras, "One of the nicest things about using the trail is to meet people who are from out of town and just first experiencing our city and to hear their reaction to the amazing beauty of the river and the trail. It makes me very proud to live in Great Falls and to be a part of what makes our city so great."

Juras would like to see continued growth up the Sun River Dike to Wadsworth Park and further development of a south loop that includes the work that is currently being completed along Warden Bridge. He also said the next major step is to get city support for a trail that will replace the temporary trail that was built behind the Great Falls Police Department.

In 25 years, the River's Edge Trail has taken beloved parts of Great Falls that were languishing and given them new life. Longtime residents can remember when the River Drive underpasses used to be impassible due to flooding. Miles of unused railroad tracks that symbolized the city's past are again being traveled.



**Allie Nelson, left, and her friend helped bag sand to fill luminarias for a River's Edge Walk in the early 2000s. After a six year break, the luminaria walk returns June 18 to celebrate the trail's 25th anniversary. (Photo: Courtesy photo)**

The committee even hopes to extend into the old smelter site, connecting yet another landmark into the network of memories and further weaving the trail into the tapestry of Great Falls.

"It's a place to just enjoy the beauty of the river," Nelson said. "A place to see friends and have a safe place to run or bike or whatever you want to do."

"The excellence of the trail is a result of a partnership with the city, Montana State Parks, community advocates and businesses that have made the trail what it is today," Juras said. "It's really been all about having advocates in key places. We have many people to thank."

Reach Tribune Staff Writer Traci Rosenbaum at 791-1490. Follow her on Twitter @GFTrib\_TRosenba.

## IF YOU GO

**Raise-a-Pint Night:** 5-9 p.m. Monday, June 13, Mighty Mo Brewery

**Bag Assembly:** 4 p.m. Wednesday, June 15, Great Falls Parks and Recreation

**Luminaria Walk:** 7 p.m. Saturday, June 18, Gibson Park, River's Edge Trail

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