

Park Use and Maintenance Along the St. Joseph River

The City of Niles has approximately 5.6 miles of St. Joseph River frontage. Approximately 2.55 miles of this frontage is located within Riverfront Park. Riverfront Park is a tremendous asset that is frequented by many people with a variety of interests on a daily basis. It is common to see walkers, bikers, skaters, volleyball players, bird watchers, river observers, wildlife observers, picnickers, and those who utilize the play structures and exercise equipment. Riverfront Park supports these interests by providing a diverse riverfront space.

On occasion, the City hears from a park-user who suggests that more vegetation along the river should be removed so there are better and more constant views along the trail system. Doing this supports the users who wish to view the river, but doesn't necessarily support other users who rely on the vegetation to support the wildlife they have come to the park to observe. The City strives to maintain clear views of the river in many locations, especially in areas where benches, swings, platforms or other structures are present, for the purpose of watching or using the river. Depending on weather and plant growth cycles, vegetation sometimes rapidly obscures the view in these areas.

While City staff and maintenance contractors are regularly in the park, if you feel an observation area needs attention, please call 269-683-4700 to report the issue.

In addition to how park-users view vegetation along the river frontage, this vegetation provides a very vital environmental service to this community and the communities down river from Niles. The City of Niles is required to maintain a Federal Storm Water Permit that is administered through the State of Michigan. Among the many requirements in this permit is a provision that the City maintain a vegetation barrier along the river. This barrier acts as a filter to catch debris that otherwise would be swept into the river during rain, wind, and storm events. This can result in unsightly trash and other debris along the river that will be collected during routine mowing and grounds maintenance.

Even more importantly, the vegetation protects against riverbank erosion. The St. Joseph River floods into Riverfront Park almost every year, and sometimes many times a year. We must be very vigilant in protecting the riverbank. There are many mature trees that are on the threshold of falling into the river due to erosion. These trees and the vegetation along the river protect the boat launches, parking lots, river trail, exercise equipment, play equipment, and so much more. The level of vegetation importance depends on the river bank elevation and the meandering of the river. There may be areas where clear view of the river is desirable, but removal of the vegetation will significantly increase erosion in that area.

The City is also monitoring locations throughout the community where invasive species of plants have taken root. When cut, some of these species come back with a vengeance and are very difficult to eradicate.

With this in mind, the City is requesting that people refrain from cutting vegetation along the City's river frontage, and report vegetation issues to the City (269-683-4700) so the issue can be evaluated and a prudent solution deployed.