

## Project opens nature center to people with disabilities

A project at the Pine River Nature Center will bring people in wheelchairs or who have other mobility issues closer to nature.

The Pine River Nature Center is owned and operated by the St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency. The work will be done by D&E Landscaping, which will upgrade trails, build retaining walls to allow access to the trails and add river-view observation decks at the nature center.

The center opened the 90-acre site in 2003 with funding through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. It was created primarily as an educational venue for area schoolchildren, but is also open to the public.

The trail project also is underwritten by a Michigan DNR grant. "If you think of it, there aren't a lot of opportunities for people with disabilities to get out and look at what Mother Nature has to offer. It's kind of a special project to me," said Ed Martindale of D&E.

Work began earlier this summer and will be completed around Labor Day.

The \$143,000 project involved a series of retaining walls to support gently inclined paths that allow easy access from the high ground near the center's

parking area down to the river basin that makes up most of the property.

Fine, gravel-like limestone was used to solidify portions of the trail, and added drainage to improve other parts. All told, about a half-mile of trail will be open to those with disabilities through the project.

Additionally, observation decks over the river at two spots along the trail will allow visitors a closer view of the Pine River as it meanders through the site.

Gigi Mericka of Port Huron is working with the RESA as it plans a handicapped-accessible treehouse at the nature center. That treehouse will be funded in part by a grant through the St. Clair County Community Foundation. Mericka, who uses a wheelchair, said of the trail project, "I'm thrilled. Allowing everyone to experience the Pine River Nature Center first-hand is wonderful. It's just a fantastic resource that keeps getting better."

Martindale said he has family members who are disabled. He had them in mind as he worked on the project.

"This just means a little more (than a typical project). It's nice to know that you're part of something special," he said.