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Nature trail nearly done  
Plans include barrier-free treehouse

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**WALES TWP.-** In a few weeks, people in wheelchairs will be able to explore more than a mile of trails winding through the woods near the Pine River Nature Center.

A crew from D&E Landscaping & Grading of Richmond spent Tuesday putting the finishing touches on a series of switchbacks on a hill behind the Nature Center. The switchbacks take the trail on a zigzagging, downhill course rather than a steep decline.

The \$143,000 project is partially being paid for by a grant from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. The grant will pay for 69% of the construction cost and the St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency, which operates the center, will pay for the rest.

Pine River Naturalist Sarah Nelson said the trail will be especially useful for students at RESA's Woodland Developmental Center, which serves about 200 children who are cognitively impaired.

"They'll actually be able to get out and get on the trails, and I think that's an important part they haven't seen of the nature center," Nelson said.

The Pine River Nature Center has more than 2 ½ miles of trails on 90 acres of land.

Other improvements being made to improve access to trails includes widening them and adding gravel for easier mobility. Two handicap-accessible observation decks are being built on the south branch of the Pine River as it winds by the trail system.

Charles Andrews, RESA's director of administrative services, said the agency also plans to build a barrier-free treehouse on one of the trails.

The project is in the design stage, but Andrews said construction should start by the end of the year.

It will be paid for by a 50-50 partnership between the Community Foundation of St. Clair County and RESA.

Edward Martindale, with D&E Landscaping, said the switchback on the new trails was the toughest challenge for landscapers. Workers had to cut into a hill and install a series of retaining walls in order to build the trail.

The project has special meaning for the company, Martindale said, because some employees have relatives who are disabled.

"We just feel it's a great opportunity for disabled people to get out and see what Mother Nature has to offer," he said. "It's really a big deal if you're in a wheelchair because there's nothing else like this around."