



IMPACT100 TRAVERSE CITY

2025 Environment, Preservation and Recreation: Paddle Antrim

www.paddleantrim.com

INITIATIVE: Igniting Community, Nature, and Play in Central Lake

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Paddle Antrim, in partnership with the Village of Central Lake, is leading a transformative initiative to expand accessibility, connectivity, and stewardship at Thurston Park along Michigan's Chain of Lakes Water Trail. With support from Impact100 Traverse City, this initiative will create inclusive recreation opportunities, strengthen community connections, and safeguard natural assets for the future.

The centerpiece is a universally accessible kayak and canoe launch, enabling safe, independent water access for individuals of all abilities. Additional features—paddlecraft storage and invasive species removal tools—will enhance safety and environmental stewardship while easing congestion at the motorized launch and swimming beach. Broader park improvements include extending sidewalks to connect downtown Central Lake with both sides of the waterfront, building continuous accessible pathways, upgrading restrooms to ADA standards, adding inclusive picnic seating and benches, and designating accessible parking. Together, these enhancements will make Thurston Park a welcoming, fully inclusive community space.

Sustainability is embedded in our initiative. Durable infrastructure, native landscaping, and educational signage will encourage long-term stewardship, while maintenance will be supported by the Village of Central Lake and Paddle Antrim's sustainable model of donations, sponsorships, and grants.

With an Impact100 Traverse City grant, Thurston Park will be transformed into a hub of inclusive recreation and community gathering. Together, we can open the water to everyone—ensuring access, connection, and joy for generations to come.

The following sections contain key information from the application, as written by the applicant. While detailed financial information has not been provided here due to its confidential nature, each applicant submitted an initiative budget and supporting financial documents as part of their application. Each proposed initiative and the supporting financial documentation has undergone a thorough review and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have met our eligibility requirements.

ORGANIZATION'S VISION STATEMENT

Thriving communities in Antrim's County's watersheds connected by pristine and well-maintained waterways.

ORGANIZATION'S MISSION STATEMENT

Paddle Antrim's mission is to protect our water resources by using paddle sports to connect people to our waterways. Through stewardship, education, improved water trail access, and promotion of our waterways we will increase water resource protection and enhance the economic vitality of the region.

DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS HISTORY

Paddle Antrim is a nonprofit organization founded in 2014 with a mission to protect Northern Michigan's water resources by connecting people to the waterways through paddle sports. Over the past decade, we have become a regional leader in water trail development, stewardship, education, and community engagement.

At the heart of Paddle Antrim's work is the Chain of Lakes Water Trail, a 100-mile, state-designated paddling route traversing 12 interconnected lakes and rivers across Antrim, Kalkaska, Grand Traverse, and Charlevoix counties. This signature trail, officially opened in 2021, was developed in partnership with over 20 local government and nonprofit entities. It includes 84 designated access sites, each with improved amenities and interpretive signage, creating a high-quality recreational asset that is accessible to all. In 2025, the Chain of Lakes Water Trail was honored as one of 11 "Pure Michigan" Trails in the entire state, and the only water trail to receive this distinction.

We are committed to maintaining and improving this incredible asset. Through our volunteers and partners, we regularly visit and maintain all 84 access sites along the water trail. Working with our site owners, we support major improvements to improve the quality of the water trail and experience for the entire community.

Who We Serve

Paddle Antrim serves both residents and visitors of Northern Michigan by increasing access to one of the region's most valuable natural assets: its freshwater lakes and rivers. Whether someone is a local resident looking for a peaceful place to paddle after work, or a visitor

exploring Northern Michigan for the first time, Paddle Antrim ensures safe, well-marked, and maintained access to these waterways.

Through free community paddles, paddling safety and skills classes, and youth programs, the organization ensures all individuals, regardless of age or experience, have the opportunity to enjoy and connect with the water. Paddle Antrim also emphasizes inclusive access, ensuring that water trail improvements support all paddlers, including those with limited mobility. Since our inception, we have engaged over 2,700 paddlers on the water.

Commitment to Water Stewardship

Paddle Antrim's commitment extends beyond recreation. As stewards of the environment, we educate paddlers on best practices to protect aquatic ecosystems, including the prevention of invasive species. For example, participants are encouraged to "Clean, Drain, and Dry" their boats and gear—especially crucial following the recent discovery of New Zealand Mud Snails in regional waterways. Paddle Antrim also hosts training sessions on monitoring aquatic invasive species and promotes responsible recreation habits through on-site signage and community outreach.

These educational initiatives aim to build a culture of environmental awareness and action, ensuring the long-term health of the Chain of Lakes and other regional water bodies. In this way, every paddler becomes a steward, helping to preserve the quality of our waters for future generations.

Supporting Local Economies

Paddle Antrim also plays a vital role in enhancing the economic vitality of the communities it serves. The Chain of Lakes Water Trail is more than a recreational feature—it's a placemaking asset that draws thousands of visitors to Northern Michigan each year. These visitors support local businesses, including outfitters, restaurants, lodging providers, and retail shops.

Signature events like the annual Paddle Antrim Festival, held each September, and other events draw large crowds for paddling excursions, food and beverage experiences, and community gatherings. These events foster a sense of regional identity while generating positive economic impact for downtowns and local businesses.

In 2024 we celebrated our 10-year anniversary in 2024 and our impacts include:

- Over \$1.3 million invested in water trail infrastructure improvements.
- Partnerships with 20+ communities and nonprofits to enhance public access.
- Thousands of people engaged through paddles, educational programs, and events.
- Creation of one of the most accessible and well-maintained water trails in the state of Michigan.

Our values have guided us since our inception: community, access, stewardship, and celebration of our shared waterways.

SUMMARY OF INITIATIVE

Paddle Antrim, in partnership with the Village of Central Lake, is launching a transformative project to enhance accessibility, connectivity, and stewardship along the Chain of Lakes Water Trail—one of Michigan’s premier paddling destinations. This initiative will create an inclusive, safe, and welcoming experience for all users at Thurston Park, a key community hub and water trail access point located in the heart of Central Lake.

At the center of the project is the installation of a universally accessible kayak and canoe launch. This launch will provide individuals of all abilities—including those using mobility devices—safe and independent access to Intermediate Lake and the broader Chain of Lakes Water Trail. Designed with both functionality and stewardship in mind, the launch will include thoughtful amenities such as a secure paddlecraft storage rack for those exploring the park or nearby downtown, and invasive species removal tools to help protect the health of local waterways. By creating a dedicated area for paddle sports, the launch will also ease congestion and reduce user conflicts at the existing motorized boat launch and popular swimming beach.

Complementing the new water access are critical park-wide connectivity improvements that will link downtown Central Lake with both the west and east sides of Thurston Park. Currently, the west side sidewalk ends abruptly before reaching the park, and no path connects both sides of the waterfront. This project will extend the sidewalk along the park’s edge, bridge the east and west sides, and create a continuous, accessible route from the heart of downtown to the waterfront and its many recreational amenities.

To ensure a truly inclusive park experience, the project will also enhance accessibility throughout the park’s infrastructure. Key improvements will include:

- Barrier-free, ADA-compliant restrooms equipped with infant and adult changing stations.
- Accessible pathways to the park’s pavilion and restrooms.
- ADA-compliant picnic seating and benches for inclusive gathering spaces.
- Designated accessible parking spaces on both the east and west sides of the waterfront.

These enhancements will make Thurston Park a destination where families, seniors, individuals with disabilities, and visitors of all backgrounds can gather, recreate, and connect with nature and community.

The initiative is a model of local collaboration and investment in sustainable infrastructure. The Village of Central Lake has already secured funding through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Trust Fund and has committed additional local resources to support the project. Paddle Antrim is actively leading fundraising efforts to close the remaining funding gap.

This project is more than an upgrade to a local park—it is a community-driven investment in equity, environmental stewardship, and regional connectivity. By creating accessible and safe water trail access and improving connectivity between downtown and the park, this initiative will enhance quality of life for residents and attract visitors to Central Lake’s vibrant waterfront and local businesses.

Importantly, the project’s impact will be lasting. Improved accessibility features and dedicated paddle infrastructure will serve the community for decades. Stewardship tools and educational signage will encourage responsible recreation and environmental protection. The collaboration

between the Village, Paddle Antrim, and other partners demonstrates a shared commitment to sustainability, inclusivity, and thoughtful design.

By removing barriers and building connections—both physical and social—this initiative will ensure that more people can experience the beauty, joy, and well-being that comes from being on the water and in nature, right in the heart of Central Lake.

COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED

The Central Lake Project serves the rural communities surrounding the Chain of Lakes Water Trail in Northern Michigan, with a particular focus on Central Lake and adjacent villages and townships in Antrim County. These communities, while rich in natural resources and scenic beauty, often lack equitable access to recreational amenities like paddling—especially for individuals and families who do not live directly on the water or cannot afford personal equipment. This initiative is designed to increase inclusive, year-round access to the water, while also promoting environmental stewardship and safety across the region.

Geographically, the project area includes a 60-mile radius around Central Lake, extending into parts of Charlevoix, Kalkaska, and Grand Traverse Counties. This footprint reflects the range most paddlers are willing to travel for a day trip and includes both full-time residents and the large influx of seasonal visitors and tourists who frequent Northern Michigan, particularly during the summer months. This mix of local and transient populations expands the project's impact, providing opportunities to serve a diverse user base.

The population in this region includes many underserved groups. Rural Northern Michigan has pockets of economic hardship where residents face barriers to outdoor recreation, including limited public access, lack of equipment, and transportation challenges. The Central Lake Project helps bridge these gaps by improving infrastructure, signage, and educational outreach at 84 access sites along the Chain of Lakes Water Trail. These improvements not only support paddlers but also benefit motorized boaters, swimmers, anglers, and others recreating on or near the water.

In total, the initiative is positioned to support over 200,000 annual paddling visits, based on regional population data and established recreation patterns. This number grows significantly with the addition of non-paddling users engaging with the water trail and its stewardship messaging. By improving safe and inclusive access to one of Michigan's most ecologically important watersheds—responsible for more than 60% of the flow into Grand Traverse Bay—the Central Lake Project uplifts local communities while protecting vital natural resources for generations to come.

NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED AND GAPS IN EXISTING SERVICES

The Central Lake community and broader Northern Michigan region face a clear and compelling need for improved, equitable access to water-based recreation. While the area is rich in lakes and rivers, access to these natural resources remains limited for many year-round

residents—especially youth, individuals with physical disabilities, and lower-income families. These underserved populations often encounter economic, physical, and geographic barriers that prevent them from participating in the outdoor activities that are central to the region’s identity and well-being.

Despite the prevalence of riparian properties in the region, these are frequently seasonal homes owned by wealthier, non-local individuals. As a result, many local residents lack the same opportunities to enjoy the water. Informal surveys conducted during school paddling programs revealed that up to 25% of middle and high school students in lakeside communities have never been in a kayak or canoe. This striking statistic highlights the deep inequity in access to recreational opportunities and underscores the urgent need for investment in inclusive infrastructure and programming.

The proposed improvements at Thurston Park directly address these gaps. As Central Lake’s only waterfront park, it plays a critical role in community life, serving as a hub for recreation, social gatherings, and local events. However, accessibility challenges—including inadequate restrooms, lack of universally accessible launch points, and unsafe water access—have long limited the park’s full potential. The initiative will introduce universally accessible amenities and a dedicated launch site for paddlers, creating a safer, more inclusive environment for all users.

The need for these enhancements has been well-documented through community input, including a formal survey conducted in 2016 and reaffirmed in the 2023 Village of Central Lake Master Plan and Recreation Plan update. Key concerns from residents include the need for safer water access, separation of paddlers from motorized boat traffic, and accessible park features. Additionally, the 2025 Chain of Lakes Water Trail Plan and local Watershed Management Plan both emphasize the importance of improving water trail infrastructure and promoting clean, safe boating practices.

Previous efforts have laid important groundwork, such as concept design development and community engagement, but limited resources have left many critical improvements unrealized. This proposal builds on those early efforts by moving from planning to implementation—enhancing accessibility, safety, and connectivity. The project will support not only local residents but also visitors traveling along the Chain of Lakes Water Trail and users of the planned “Flyer” trail connecting Central Lake to Bellaire.

Ultimately, this initiative will enhance equity, public health, and community resilience. By providing safe, inclusive access to the waterfront and linking people to nature, recreation, and one another, the project will create lasting benefits for Central Lake and the greater Northern Michigan region. It will foster a fairer, more vibrant community where everyone—regardless of income, ability, or background—can connect to the water and experience the joy, health, and sense of belonging that outdoor recreation provides.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE

The long-term sustainability of the improvements to Central Lake and its connection to the Chain of Lakes Water Trail is grounded in strong community partnerships, ongoing investment, and a shared commitment to stewardship. These proposed improvements to the Central Lake trailhead — including the installation of a universally accessible kayak launch, upgraded

parking, native plantings, and interpretive signage — were thoughtfully designed not only to enhance access and safety, but to ensure lasting value for the public and the environment.

Paddle Antrim, the Village of Central Lake, and other regional partners have demonstrated a deep commitment to the success of the Chain of Lakes Water Trail through collaborative planning, community engagement, and financial investment. These partners will continue to play a key role in the upkeep of the site with the Village leading ongoing maintenance responsibilities and leveraging of resources for future needs.

Ongoing care and programming for the Water Trail are supported through Paddle Antrim's sustainable funding model, which includes individual giving, business sponsorships, grant funding, and earned income. As a nonprofit with a year-round presence and a clear mission to connect people to the water and protect natural resources, Paddle Antrim actively engages the public in stewardship and advocacy. Volunteers and donors alike help ensure that this state designated water trail remains safe, accessible, and welcoming for paddlers of all backgrounds and abilities.

This project is part of a broader, long-term vision for sustainable recreation and community revitalization throughout the region. The Village of Central Lake's investment in water trail infrastructure is closely tied to its downtown development goals, helping support local businesses, draw visitors, and strengthen the village's identity as a hub along the Chain of Lakes.

With robust partnerships, a strong stewardship ethic, and a track record of successful implementation, the Central Lake improvements are built to last — and to serve as a model of how local communities can sustainably invest in water-based recreation while protecting the natural resources that make these experiences possible.