

HOW RECREATIONAL BOATING BUILDS A GREAT LAKES CITY

The ecosystem connecting on-water access and participation to economic activity, workforce, quality of life and freshwater stewardship

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THE WATER'S EDGE IS NOT THE FINISH LINE.

Great Lakes cities are investing in parks, trails, housing, public spaces and stronger connections to the water. Those investments bring people to the waterfront.

RECREATIONAL BOATING ACTIVATES THE WATER ITSELF.

When people can get on the water, a broader city ecosystem begins to work: marinas and marine businesses, restaurants and lodging, visitor spending, careers, family experiences, community identity and support for a healthy lake.



A city does not become a waterfront city simply because it sits beside water. It becomes one when people can experience the water as part of life.

FROM THE WATER'S EDGE TO CITY-WIDE IMPACT

Most waterfront strategies begin on land: parks, trails, housing, public spaces and mixed-use development. Those investments matter. But the broader return begins when people can experience the water itself.

Recreational boating connects waterfront investment to a larger city ecosystem: first experiences, repeated participation, marine businesses, visitor spending, careers, family life, community identity and stewardship.

Every city starts from a different place. Some have public access but limited boating infrastructure. Others have

attractive public spaces but too few real pathways onto the water. Some have marine assets, but they are disconnected from downtown, tourism or workforce efforts.

The opportunity is to see the full system, identify the missing link and strengthen the assets already in place.



The question is not simply: Do we have a waterfront?
The question is: Can people in our community build a real relationship with the water?

THE INVITATION

EXPOSURE • ACCESS • FIRST EXPERIENCE • ENGAGEMENT • PARTICIPATION

THE RETURNS

LIVE • WORK • PLAY • CARE

THE MUNICIPAL ROLE

PROTECT • CONNECT • ACTIVATE • MEASURE

THE BASIN-WIDE OPPORTUNITY

The model can be adapted for harbor communities, regional waterfront cities and major metropolitan centers throughout the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence basin.

THE RECREATIONAL BOATING ECOSYSTEM

Bringing people to the water's edge creates a waterfront. Getting them onto the water creates an economy, a workforce, stronger communities and a constituency for the lake.

THE CITY CREATES THE CONDITIONS

A Visible & Welcoming Waterfront · Clean, Safe & Navigable Water · Public Ramps, Docks & Transient Slips · Marinas, Boatyards, Fuel, Service & Storage · Rentals, Charters, Clubs & Shared Access · Events, Instruction, Safety & Community Partners

THE INVITATION: "This is for you."



RENT · CHARTER · SHARE · JOIN · OWN · WORK

 The water is an asset.
The invitation opens the door.
Participation is the multiplier.

WHAT PARTICIPATION CREATES

LIVE

- Well-Being
- Family
- Belonging
- Quality of Life

WORK

- Careers
- Credentials
- Businesses
- Entrepreneurship

PLAY

- Tourism
- Spending
- Active Waterfront
- Destination Identity

CARE

- Connection
- Responsible Use
- Stewardship
- Advocacy

WHAT RETURNS TO THE CITY

HEALTHY WATER + ACTIVE WATERFRONT

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY · JOBS · TOURISM · TALENT · WELL-BEING · STEWARDSHIP

 Participation creates the next invitation.

EXPOSURE AND ACCESS OPEN THE DOOR

The invitation says, “You belong here.” Exposure allows someone to picture themselves here. Access gives them a real way to begin.

Many lifelong participants begin with something simple: seeing people like themselves on the water, knowing someone who boats, visiting an active waterfront or being offered a first ride. But exposure alone is not access. A city needs real entry points: public ramps and docks, safe and welcoming facilities, rentals, charters, clubs, community programs, lessons, events and clear information about what comes next.

1 EXPOSURE

“I can picture myself here.”

2 ACCESS

“There is a practical, affordable way to begin.”

3 FIRST EXPERIENCE

“The water is no longer something I only look at.”

ENGAGEMENT TURNS A MOMENT INTO A PATHWAY

A single experience can create a memory.
A connected pathway can help create lifelong participation.

People stay engaged when they can build confidence, learn safely, return to the water and see a next step that fits their lives. That next step may be another class, a rental, a charter, a club, a shared-use program, a used boat, an entry-level boat or a marine career.

THE
PARTICIPATION
PATHWAY



FIRST
EXPERIENCE



SKILLS AND
CONFIDENCE



REPEATED
ACCESS



PARTICIPATION



OWNERSHIP / CAREER
/ FAMILY TRADITION /
STEWARDSHIP

Invitation, access, participation, workforce and ownership are not separate programs. They are one ecosystem.

Rent. Charter. Share. Join. Own. Work. A strong city supports more than one way onto the water.

LIVE

WATER CHANGES HOW PEOPLE EXPERIENCE A CITY AND THEIR OWN LIVES.

Time on and near water can support mental restoration, physical activity, social connection, family time and a stronger sense of belonging.

For a city, those human benefits become part of quality of place. They help shape where people want to live, work, visit and raise families. They also make a waterfront feel like part of everyday community life, not simply a view or a destination for someone else.

Family Connection · Outdoor Activity · Mental Restoration · Belonging · Community Identity · Talent Attraction + Retention



Water is a competitive advantage only when people can experience it.



THE RESEARCH BACKS IT UP

16,307 ADULTS · 18 COUNTRIES

International research found that more frequent recreational visits to inland and coastal waters were associated with higher positive well-being and lower mental distress.

EXPERIENCING THE WATER MATTERS.

Source: White, M.P. et al. (2021), Scientific Reports, 11, 8903.

WORK

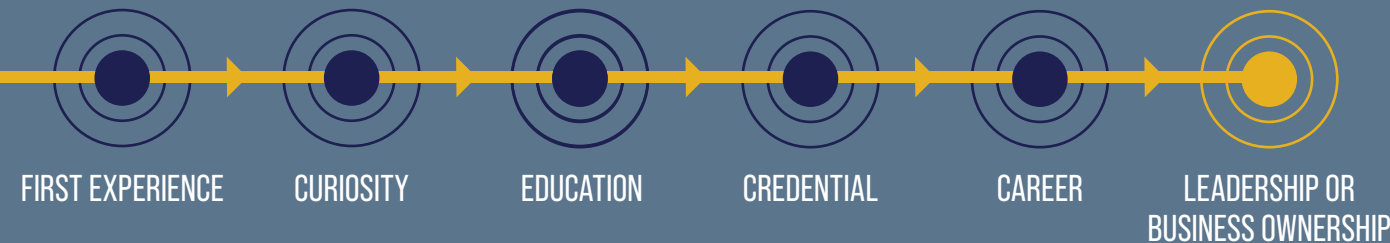
THE PARTICIPATION PIPELINE IS ALSO A WORKFORCE PIPELINE.

People are more likely to imagine a career in an industry they have seen, experienced and understood. The child who first gets on a boat can become the technician, dockmaster, marina manager, captain, sales professional, manufacturer, educator, entrepreneur or waterfront leader a city needs. Marine careers are connected to local water, local infrastructure, local businesses and local customers. First exposure can become curiosity. Curiosity can become education, a credential, a career and eventually leadership or business ownership.



You cannot build a marine workforce if people never see, experience or understand the industry.

THE
CAREER
ARC



CAREER CLUSTERS

Technical Service · Marina Operations · Manufacturing · Dealership + Sales · Hospitality + Tourism
Charters + Instruction · Waterfront Construction · Entrepreneurship

PLAY

ONE BOAT.
MANY TRANSACTIONS.

A boat entering a harbor can create economic activity far beyond the marina. Visiting boaters need places to dock, fuel, eat, shop, stay, get repairs, explore and return.

Recreational boating links the water to the rest of the city. It activates waterfront districts, supports marine and visitor-economy businesses, extends the visitor experience and gives people a reason to see a city from a completely different perspective.



Boating is both an experience and a way of arriving.



THE LOCAL RIPPLE

MARINE SERVICES

Dockage • Fuel • Service • Repair

VISITOR SPENDING

Dining • Lodging • Groceries • Retail

CITY EXPERIENCE

Attractions • Transportation • Events • Return Visits

Source: Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Parks and Watercraft, 2022 Economic Impact and Customer Satisfaction Study.

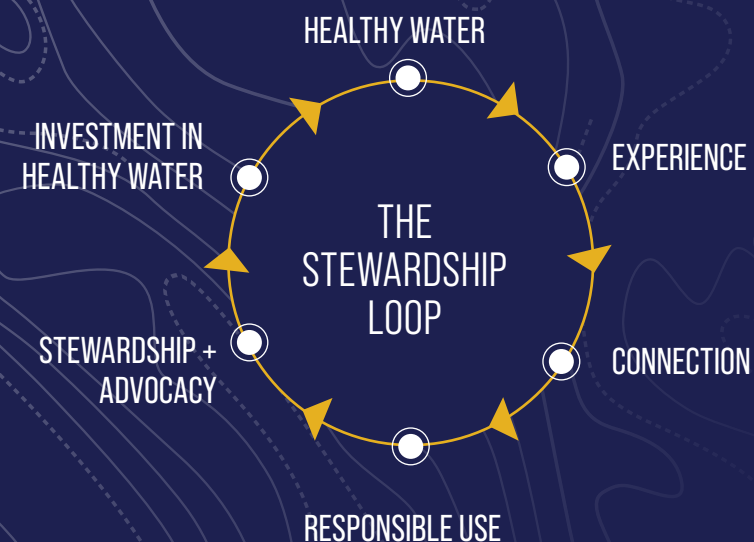
209.2 MILLION
ANNUAL PERSON HOURS
ON THE WATER THROUGH
RECREATIONAL BOATING

CARE

PEOPLE PROTECT PLACES THEY KNOW AND VALUE.

A healthy lake is the foundation of the recreational boating economy. Recreation, in turn, can create a personal relationship with the water. Research suggests that repeated recreation in coastal and freshwater places is associated with stronger stewardship intentions. That relationship is not automatic. It grows when access, education, responsible boating and community engagement are intentionally connected.

The result is a larger constituency for clean water, safe access, resilient waterfronts and the long-term health of the Great Lakes.



Clean Marinas • Safe Fueling • Invasive Species Prevention • Water Education • Shoreline Cleanup • Habitat Protection • Support for Restoration + Access



Experience creates connection.
Connection can build a constituency for clean water.



A WATERFRONT IS NOT YET A RECREATIONAL BOATING ECOSYSTEM

Parks, trails, housing, promenades and gathering spaces bring people to the water's edge. Recreational and working waterfronts allow people to use the water.

THE WATER'S EDGE

Parks • Trails • Housing • Promenades • Dining • Public Spaces • Arts + Events

THE WATER-USE SYSTEM

Public Ramps + Docks • Transient Slips • Marinas + Boatyards • Fuel + Service + Repair • Storage + Trailer Access • Rentals + Charters + Clubs • Instruction + Safety • Clean + Navigable Water

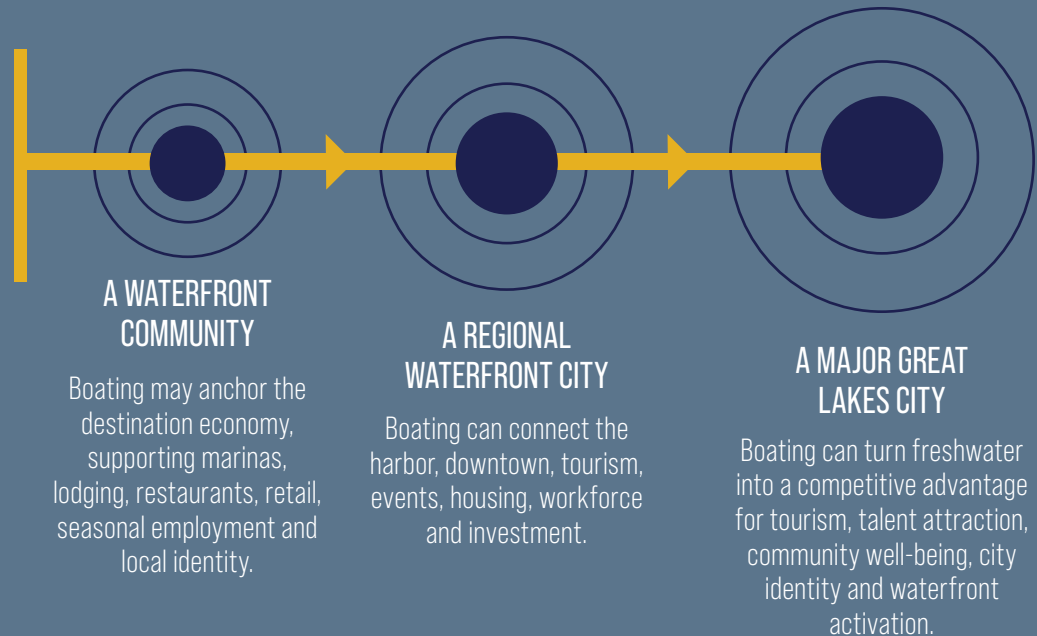
Marinas, boatyards, ramps, docks and water-dependent land are easy to displace and can be difficult and costly to re-establish. They should be treated as part of a city's infrastructure, not as leftover land uses.



Waterfront development builds the edge.
Recreational boating activates the water.
A thriving Great Lakes city needs both.

THE SAME ECOSYSTEM, AT EVERY SCALE

THE SIZE OF THE
COMMUNITY
CHANGES. THE
BASIC SYSTEM
DOES NOT.



Every city can ask the same question: What becomes possible when more people can experience our water?

WHAT GREAT LAKES CITIES CAN DO

1

PLAN FOR ACTIVITY ON THE WATER, NOT ONLY DEVELOPMENT BESIDE IT.

2

PROTECT MARINAS, BOATYARDS, RAMPS, DOCKS AND WATER-DEPENDENT LAND.

3

CREATE CLEAR PATHWAYS FROM FIRST EXPOSURE TO REPEATED PARTICIPATION.

4

SUPPORT MULTIPLE ENTRY MODELS: COMMUNITY PROGRAMS, RENTALS, CHARTERS, CLUBS, SHARED ACCESS AND ATTAINABLE OWNERSHIP.

5

WELCOME VISITING BOATERS WITH DOCKAGE, SERVICES, WAYFINDING AND CONNECTIONS TO DOWNTOWN.

6

CONNECT RECREATIONAL BOATING TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM, WORKFORCE, PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS.

7

MEASURE THE FULL RETURN: PARTICIPATION, JOBS, BUSINESSES, VISITOR SPENDING, CAREERS, ACCESS AND STEWARDSHIP.

Ohio's data shows the scale already in motion. The ecosystem model itself can be adapted and measured by cities throughout the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence basin.

THE OPPORTUNITY

RECREATIONAL BOATING BELONGS IN THE GREAT LAKES CITY-BUILDING CONVERSATION.

Not as a side activity. As a connector between economic development, workforce, tourism, public health, quality of life and freshwater stewardship.

The economic return is only one part of the story. Recreational boating turns access into participation, participation into activity and connection, then connection into a long-term constituency for the waterfront and the water. Great Lakes and St. Lawrence cities have the water. Many have invested heavily in the water's edge. The next opportunity is to make it easier for people to experience the water, build lives and careers around it and become part of the constituency that protects it.

QUESTIONS FOR EVERY WATERFRONT CITY

WHERE IS THE ON-RAMP IN YOUR CITY?

WHICH LINK IS MISSING?

WHAT WOULD BECOME POSSIBLE IF MORE PEOPLE COULD EXPERIENCE YOUR WATER?

WHAT DOES THIS ECOSYSTEM LOOK LIKE WHEN MEASURED?

One connected ecosystem—a model every Great Lakes and St. Lawrence city can adapt to its own waterfront.

ACTIVATE THE WATER. STRENGTHEN THE CITY.

Great Lakes and St. Lawrence communities already possess an extraordinary asset. The opportunity is to make the water part of everyday life, economic strategy and community identity.

THE WATER IS HERE. THE PEOPLE ARE HERE.
THE OPPORTUNITY IS TO CONNECT THEM.



THE ECONOMIC POWER OF RECREATIONAL BOATING

ACROSS THE GREAT LAKES, WATER IS MORE THAN AN ASSET. IT IS AN ECONOMIC ENGINE. OHIO OFFERS ONE EXAMPLE.

Recreational boating connects communities to an economy that reaches far beyond the water. It supports marine businesses, jobs, tourism and spending throughout waterfront communities.

The scale of that opportunity can be seen in Ohio:

\$6.4 BILLION
ANNUAL ECONOMIC IMPACT

\$2.75 BILLION
MARINE TRADES IMPACT

\$3.66 BILLION
RECREATIONAL BOATING IMPACT

45,856
JOBS SUPPORTED

404,248
BOAT-OWNING HOUSEHOLDS

631,563
REGISTERED BOATS

Source: Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Parks and Watercraft, 2022 Economic Impact and Customer Satisfaction Study.

ONE STATE. BILLIONS IN IMPACT.

Multiply that opportunity across the Great Lakes basin.

Ohio data is shown as an example of the economic scale recreational boating can create within a Great Lakes state.



WHAT ONE STATE CAN TEACH A REGION

Access drives participation. Participation creates economic activity that strengthens businesses, jobs and communities.



THE OPPORTUNITY IS TO CONNECT MORE PEOPLE TO THE GREAT LAKES.

Access > Participation > Economic Activity > Stronger Communities



ACCESS IS LOCAL

63.6%

TRAVEL 20 MILES OR LESS

31.9%

TRAVEL 5 MILES OR LESS

For most Ohio boaters surveyed, the water they use is close to home.

Source: Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Parks and Watercraft, 2022 Economic Impact and Customer Satisfaction Study.



ACCESS CREATES PARTICIPATION

100.5 MILLION

PERSON-HOURS
Through liveries and shared nonmotorized access

4.9 MILLION

PERSON-HOURS
Through charters



THE RETURN EXTENDS BEYOND THE WATERFRONT.



\$432.4 MILLION
RESTAURANT ECONOMIC OUTPUT



\$430.8 MILLION
LODGING ECONOMIC OUTPUT



\$389.1 MILLION
TRANSPORTATION ECONOMIC OUTPUT

Selected modeled economic impacts reflect direct, indirect and induced activity within Ohio's recreational boating economy and are included within the \$6.4 billion total.



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