

The Economic Value of Recreation on the Willamette River, 2026

Portland's Willamette River is one of the city's iconic features. The City's investments in water quality improvement like the **Big Pipe** and strong river advocacy efforts from community organizations have transformed it into an asset supporting recreation, commercial uses, and civic pride. Today, the river supports millions of recreational visits and generates substantial economic value. Portland has an opportunity to build on these past investments by expanding new river-related amenities and leaning into river-related economic development opportunities.

THE WILLAMETTE RIVER DRAWS MILLIONS OF RECREATIONAL USERS PER YEAR

The river and its adjacent amenities attract at least 2 million annual recreational visitors engage in land- and water-based activities with



1.2 MILLION+
VISITS
TO RIVERFRONT PARKS



800,000+
BIKE TRIPS
ON WATERFRONT TRAILS



55,000+
BOAT TRIPS
(MOTORIZED+NON-MOTORIZED)



27,000+
FISHING
TRIPS

and more visits for which data aren't available to quantify, including commercial operations, events, and growing interest in swimming.

WILLAMETTE RIVER RECREATION GENERATES SUBSTANTIAL ECONOMIC VALUE

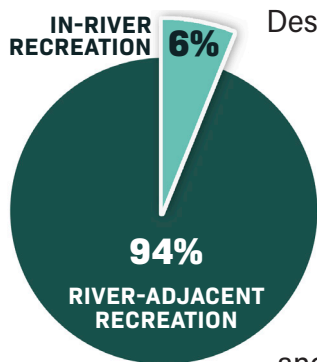
Recreation in and around the study area contributes a conservatively estimated **\$121 million each year in visitor spending, plus \$190 million in additional non-monetary, recreational value** (the benefits people experience that are not captured in market transactions). Commercial boating operations generate at least 125,000 user days per year (mostly in the summer) and are not captured in this analysis.



SPENDING & CONSUMER SURPLUS by Recreation Type, Economic Contribution Estimates (2025\$)				
Recreation Type	Annual Contribution (\$M)		Share of Total	
	Spending	Consumer Surplus	Spending	Consumer Surplus
In-River Recreation	\$7M	\$9M	6%	5%
River-Adjacent Recreation	\$113M	\$181M	94%	95%
TOTAL	\$121M	\$190M	100%	100%

Source: Rosenberger (2017); Earth Economics (2024); ECONorthwest analysis

MOST OF THE WILLAMETTE'S ECONOMIC VALUE COMES FROM RIVER-ADJACENT ACTIVITIES






Despite \$1.4 billion+ invested in Portland's water quality and \$100 million+ in river-related recreation facilities and access over the last 25 years, river-adjacent activities remain the larger driver of recreation users and economic value. The City can invest in more direct engagement with the river by expanding accessible water-based amenities and cultivating policies and relationships that invite and support swimming, boating, and a broader range of commercial recreation enterprise.

How Does Portland Compare?

PORTLAND HAS INVESTED LESS THAN ITS PEERS

Although the City, regional and state partners, nonprofits, and the private sector have worked to expand recreation along the river, Portland has seen less investment per capita on the Willamette since 2000 than comparison cities—in fact, half of Portland's total amount occurred in the early 2000s and has not kept pace in recent years. While Portland performs relatively well in riverfront park use and access, its river recreation amenities remain less developed than those in peer cities. Portlanders have strong demand for outdoor recreation and a desire to engage with the river despite underinvestment. This means that new innovative and broadly accessible river-recreation amenities are likely to translate into more dollars spent and more engagement in water-based activities.

	 RIVER ACCESS POINTS	 RIVERFRONT PARK USE	 TOTAL INVESTMENT***
Portland	15 Access Points (0.94 per mile) in approx. 16 mi. of riverfront	590K Annual Recreation Users** (25% of all user)	\$114+ Million (\$178 per capita) since 2000
Pittsburgh	– Similar (0.97)	▲ Higher (31%) Point State Park	▲ Higher (\$488 pc)
Boise	▲ Higher (1.20)	▲ Higher (37%)	– Similar (\$173 pc) Largely since 2015
Milwaukee	▲ Higher (1.23)*	– Similar (27%)	▲ Higher (\$300 pc)
Minneapolis	▼ Lower (0.75)	– Similar (23%)	– Similar (\$163 pc) Largely since 2015
Vancouver	▼ Lower (0.80)*	Data not available in CA	▲ Higher (\$203 pc)

* Excludes access points on larger bodies of water (e.g. lakes, bays).

** Recreation User = 30-minute visit or longer; In the most popular waterfront park.

*** Low-end estimates include publicly available data on local, state, nonprofit, and private contributions, adjusted for inflation.

Peer cities were selected based on criteria for medium-sized cities that undertook intentional revitalization efforts to increase recreational use of waterfront areas through public and private investments in the last two decades.

What Can Portland Do To Grow the Economic Value of River Recreation?

DIVERSIFYING IN-WATER RECREATION IS THE NEXT PHASE OF RIVER INVESTMENT

Current recreation patterns suggest Portland's stretch of the Willamette River is underutilized relative to its centrality to the city, creating an opportunity to expand in-river recreation activity and related economic value.

To do this, Portland can:



Diversify and enhance access for water-based recreation amenities:
In the river, on the river, by the river.



Coordinate among all the river champions. Align strategies, build relationships, and expand resource pool for investment.



Build public-private partnerships for investment and stewardship. Support rapid and sustainable expansion of water-based recreation amenities.

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