



# Willamette River Recreation & Economic Value

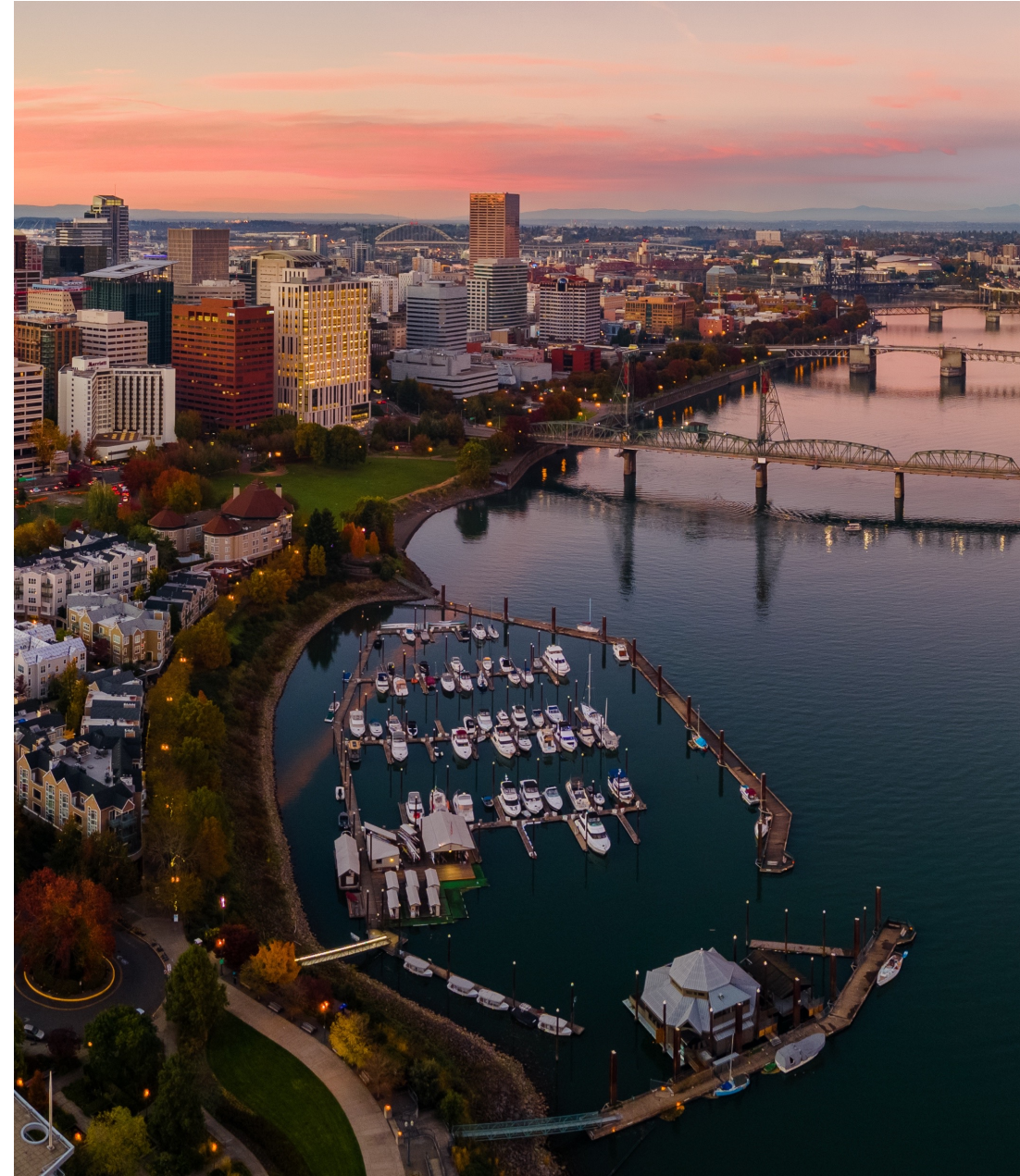
PMC Forum: Unlocking the  
Waterfront's Economic  
Potential

June 18, 2026



# Why Does Recreation on the Willamette Matter?

- Builds enjoyment of and connection with the natural environment
- Strengthens Portland's identity and community
- Generates direct and indirect economic value



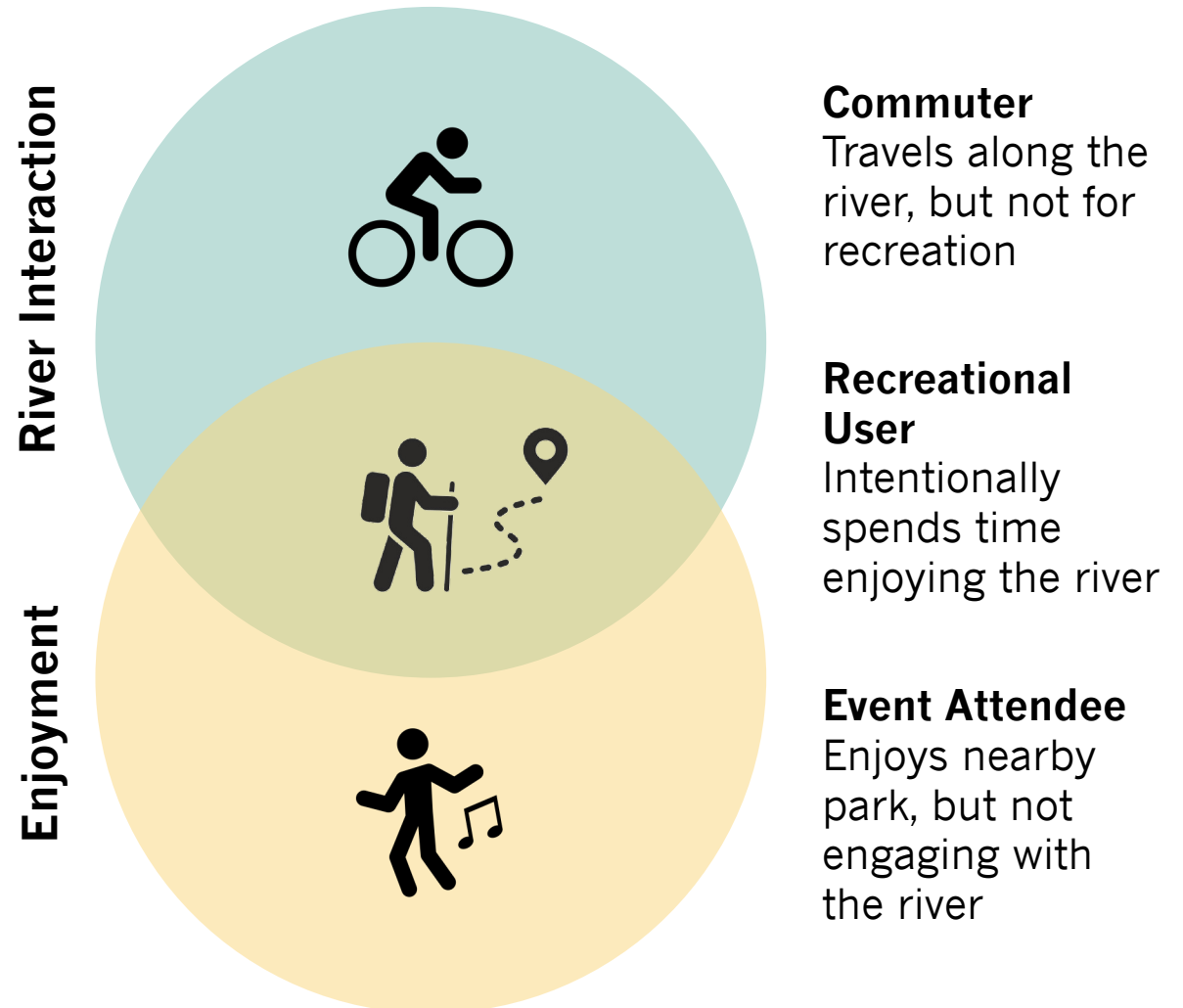
# Key Research Questions

- How does Willamette River recreation support economic value today?
- What economic opportunities is Portland missing out on for river recreation?
- What could success look like for more fully activating the recreational value of the river?



# Who is a Recreational User?

- This study focuses on users engaging in recreational activities related to the river
- Some users may travel through the same area, but the primary driver is not recreation; some recreation may occur nearby, but does not interact with the river as an amenity



Source: ECOnorthwest

A scenic view of the Willamette River. In the foreground, a large, multi-decked tour boat named "Portland Spirit" is moving across the water. To the left, several kayakers are visible on the river. In the background, a large concrete bridge spans the river, and a dense forest of green trees covers the hillsides. The text "How Does Willamette River Recreation Support Economic Value Today?" is overlaid in the center of the image.

# How Does Willamette River Recreation Support Economic Value Today?

# What is Needed to Generate Economic Value?



## What do investments look like in Portland?



**Natural:** Protecting water quality for swimming; habitat and greenways



**Physical:** Access points and amenities in and along the river



**Social:** Regulations, and policies; organizational networks; cultural relationships

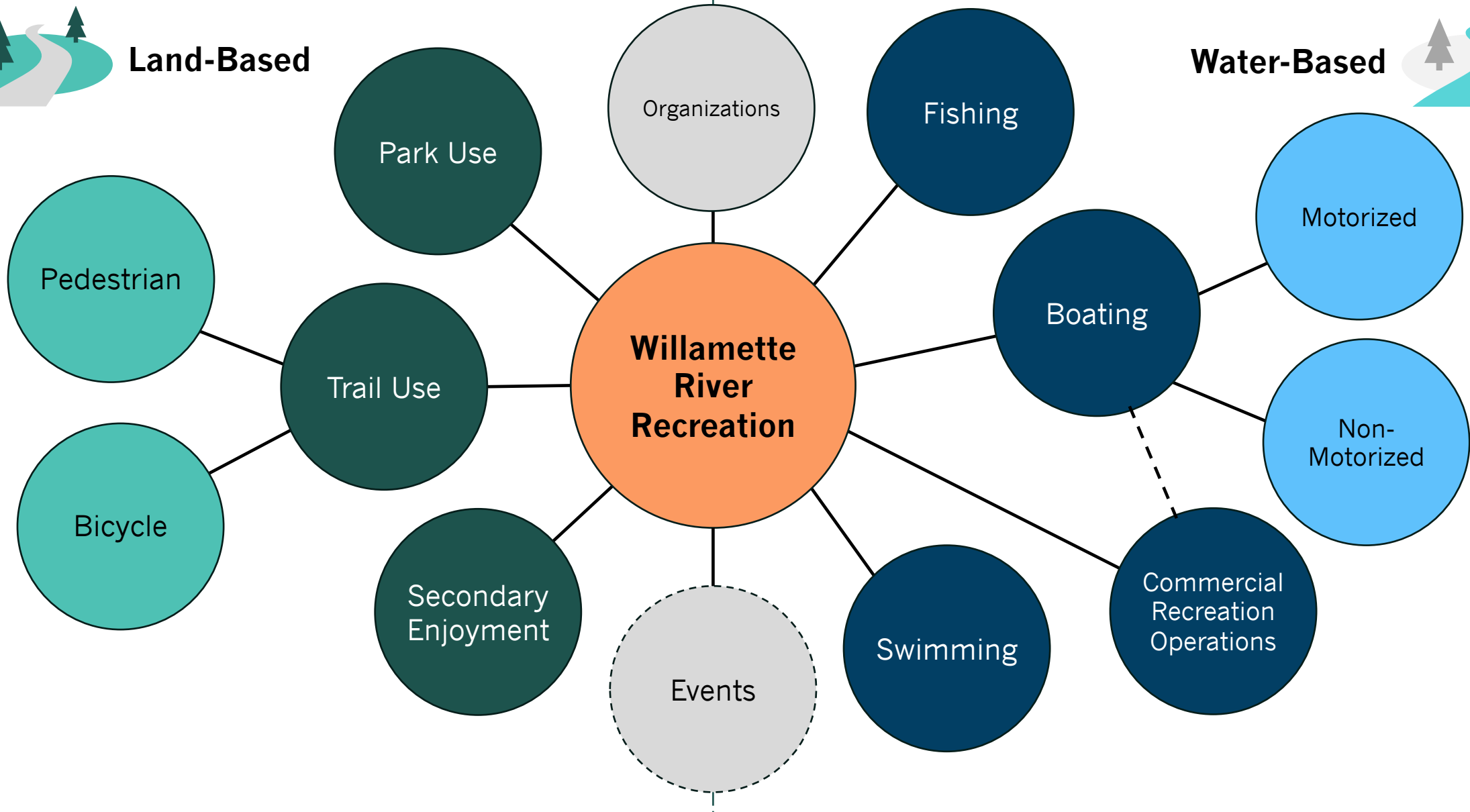
# Users Engage in Land-Based and Water-Based Activities



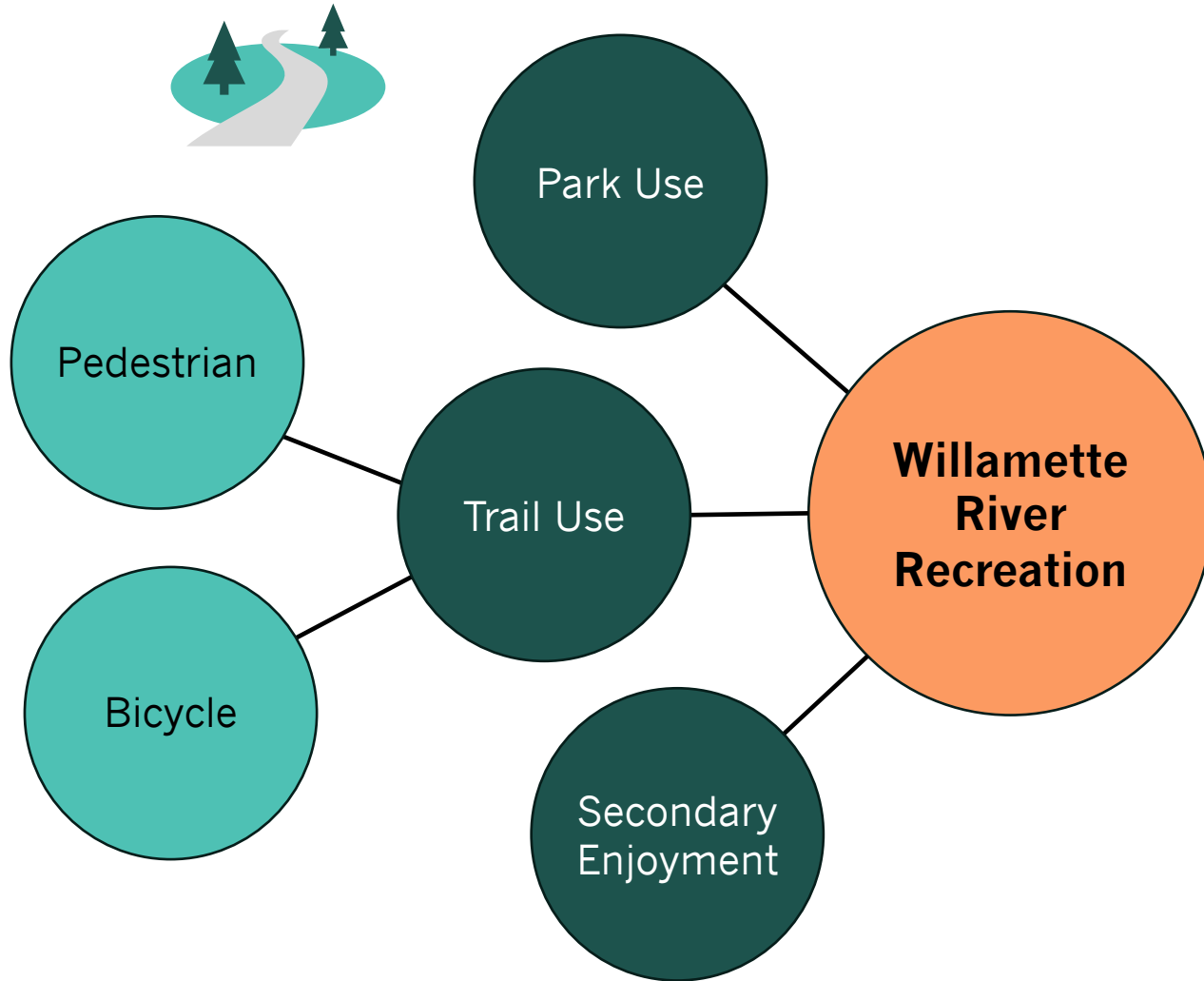
**Land-Based**



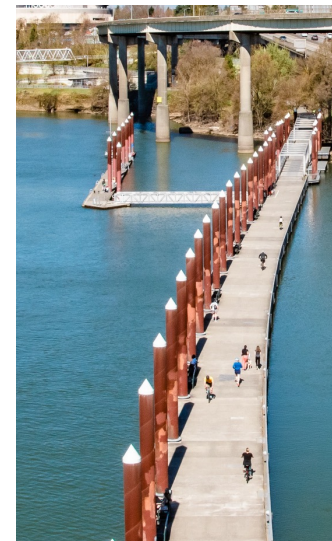
**Water-Based**



# Land-Based Activities Involve Adjacent Enjoyment of the River



**Land-based uses** are recreational activities that benefit from proximity to the river by enhancing enjoyment and/or attracting more users.



*Trail Use*

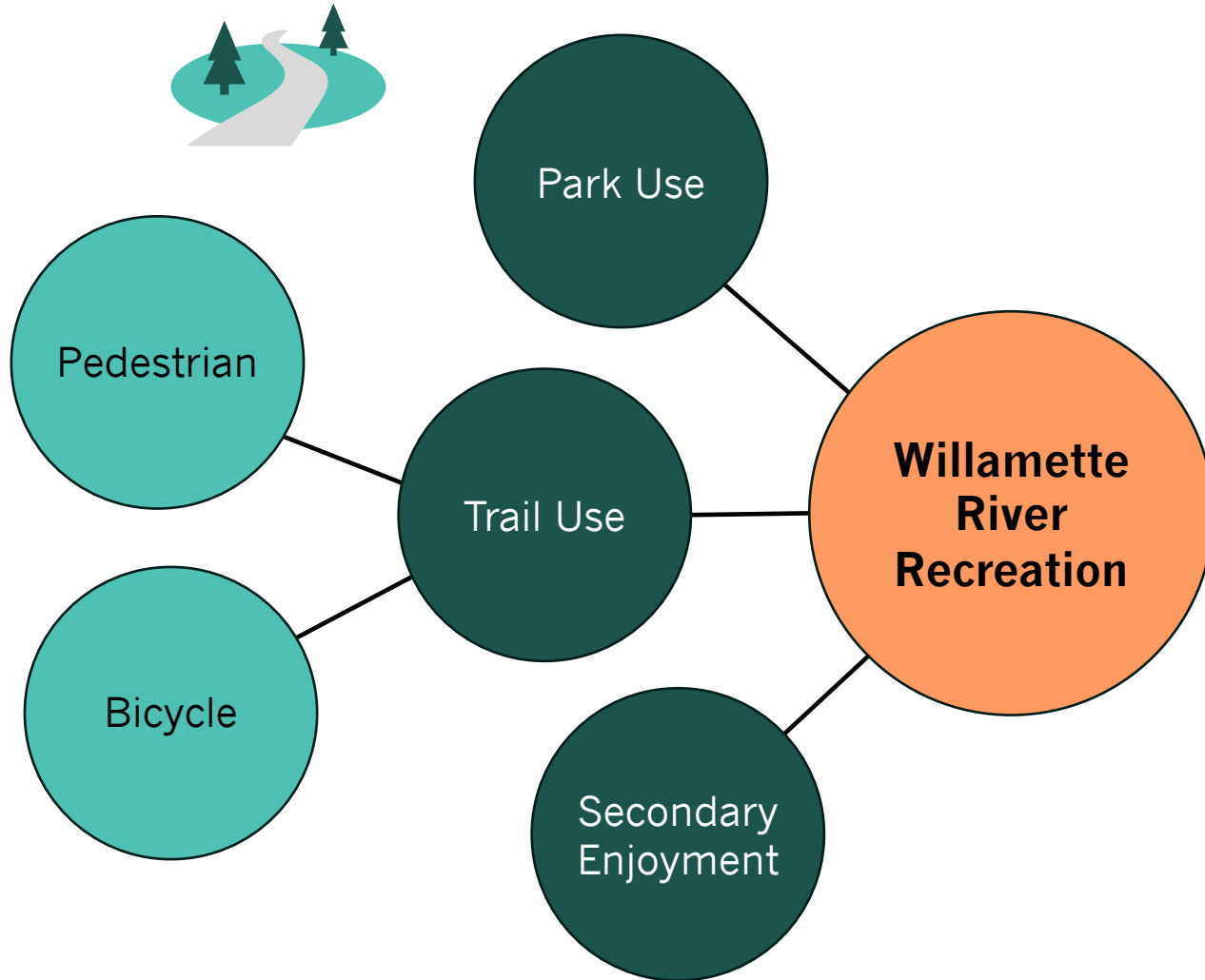


*Park Use*



*Secondary Enjoyment*

# Land-Based Activities Involve Adjacent Enjoyment of the River



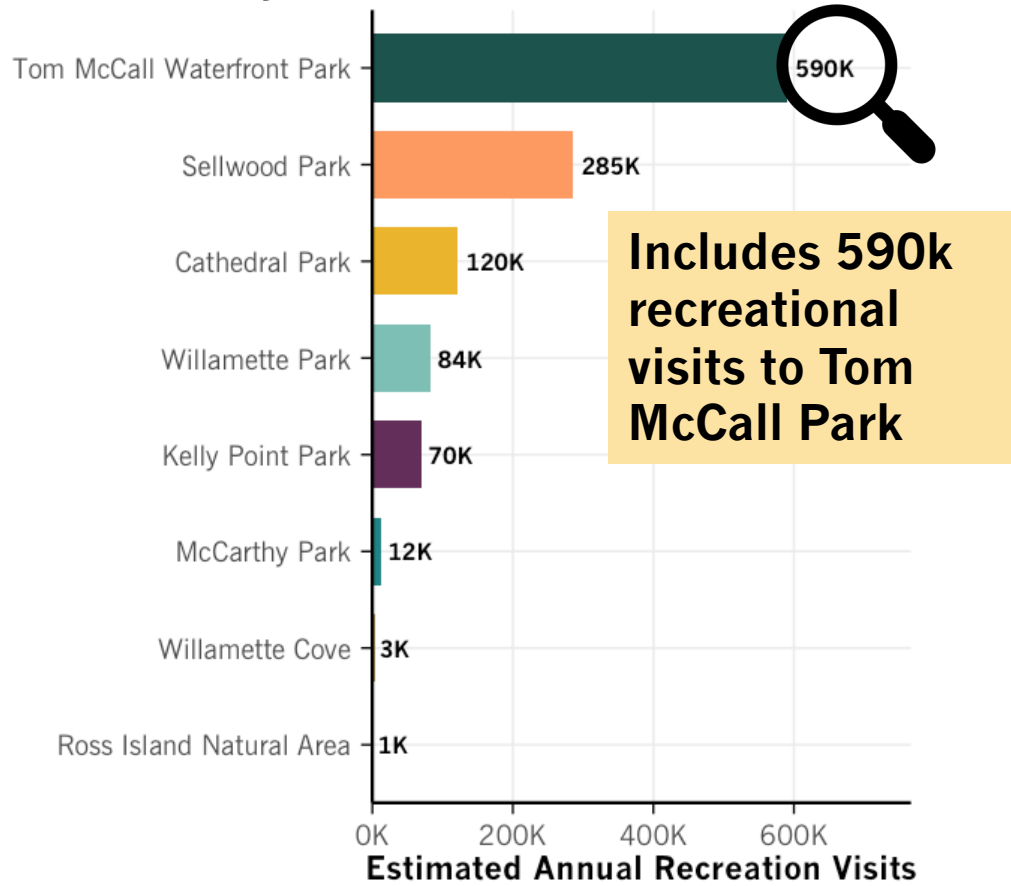
## What Can We Quantify:

- Park Use
- Biking
- Walking & jogging (limited)
- Secondary enjoyment (qualitative only)

Riverfront Parks Attract 1.2 Million Annual Visits



Estimated Annual Recreational Park Visits by Location

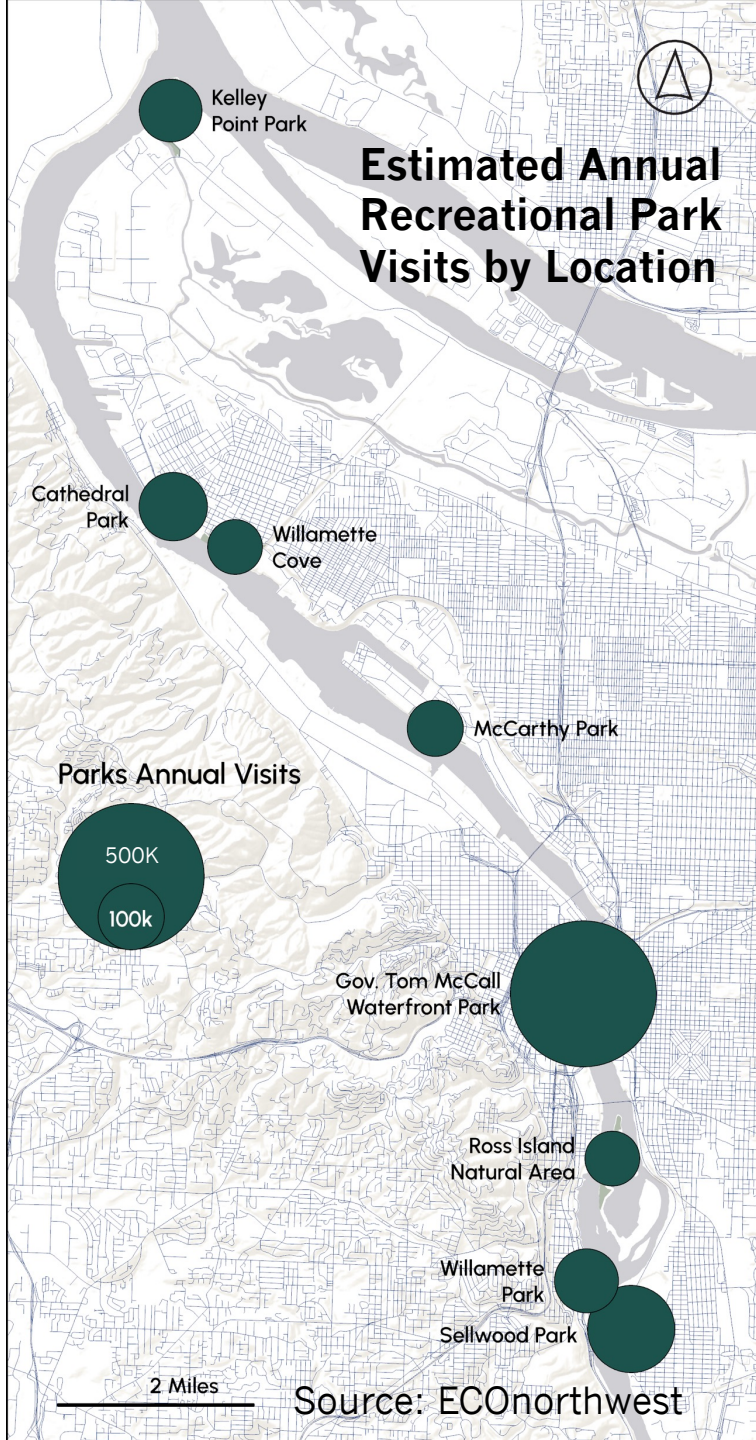


“Recreation User” = 30-minute visit or longer (not including large events)

Recreation Users as a Share of Total Visitors

Tom McCall Park	30%
Sellwood Park	41%
Willamette Park	26%
Cathedral Park	48%
Kelley Point Park	50%
McCarthy Park	66%
Willamette Cove	33%
Ross Island Park	50%

Source: Placer.ai (all)



Estimated Annual Recreational Park Visits by Location

2 Miles Source: ECONorthwest

### Secondary Enjoyment Adds Value to Properties Near the River

- Proximity to the Willamette can add value to nearby properties
- Scenic views and access to amenities like trails raise what property owners/tenants are willing to pay

*Multiple studies have shown that views of natural bodies of water can increase property values. The magnitude of the price premium varies by the amount of frontage, quality of views, and size/quality of the body of water.*

*One study found that **river views carried a premium of up to 62%** (higher than lakes views but lower than ocean views).<sup>1</sup>*



# Water-Based Activities Involve Direct Contact with the River

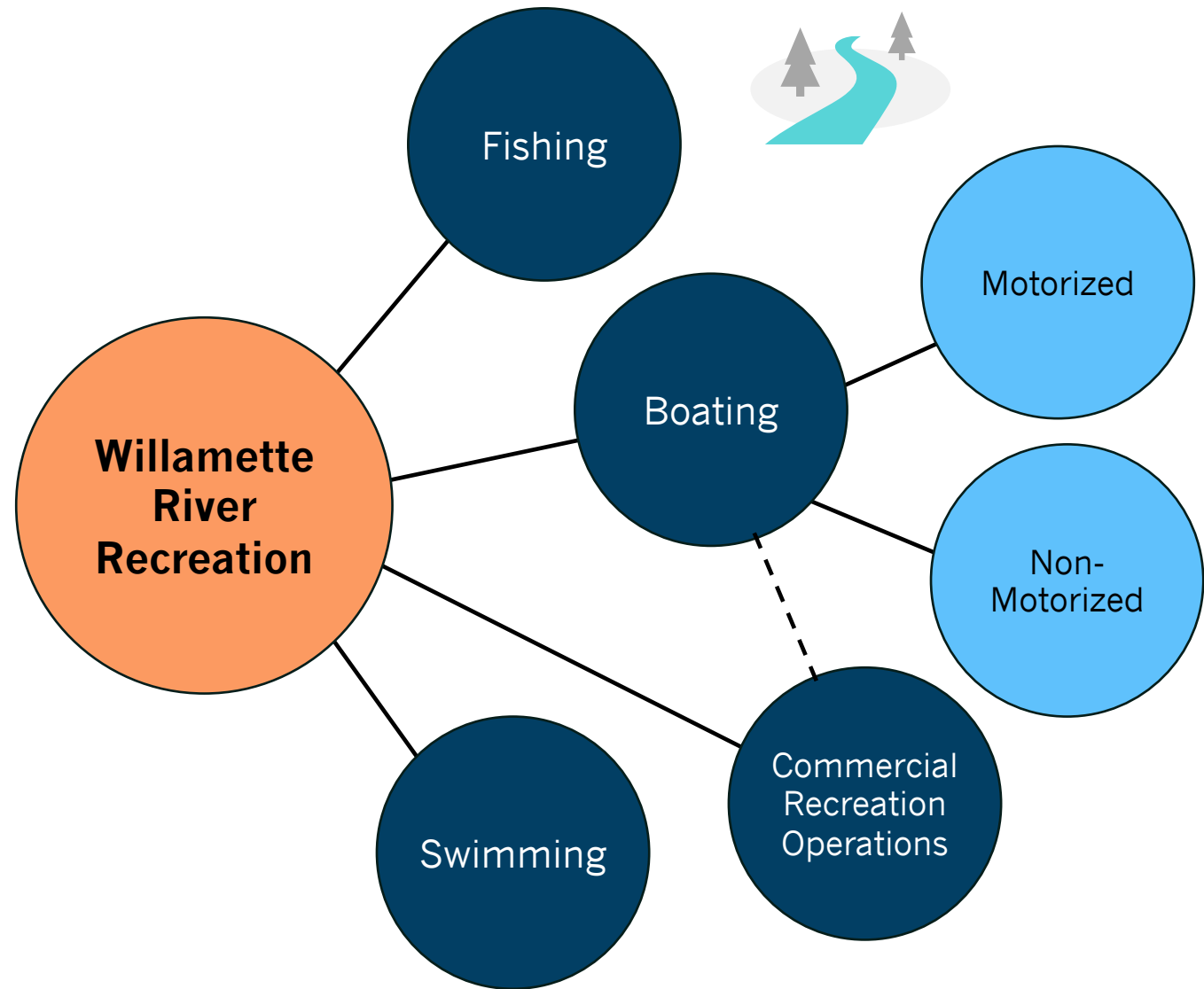
**Water-based uses** are recreational activities that involve users physically interacting with the river for enjoyment.



Fishing

Boating (Commercial)

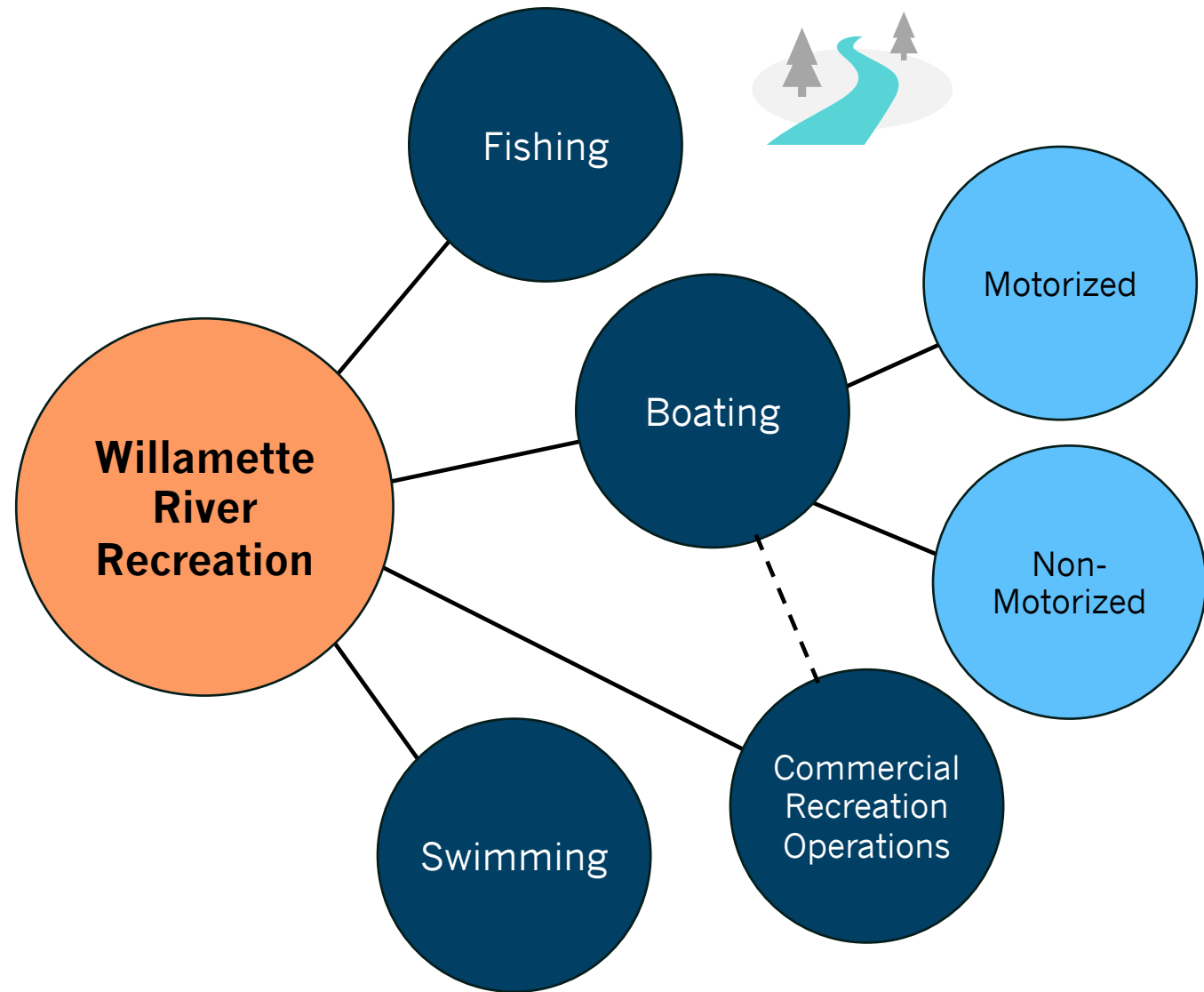
Swimming



# Water-Based Activities Involve Direct Contact with the River

## What Can We Quantify:

- Fishing
- Boating
- Commercial Recreational Operations (partial)
- Swimming (partially included in park use analysis)

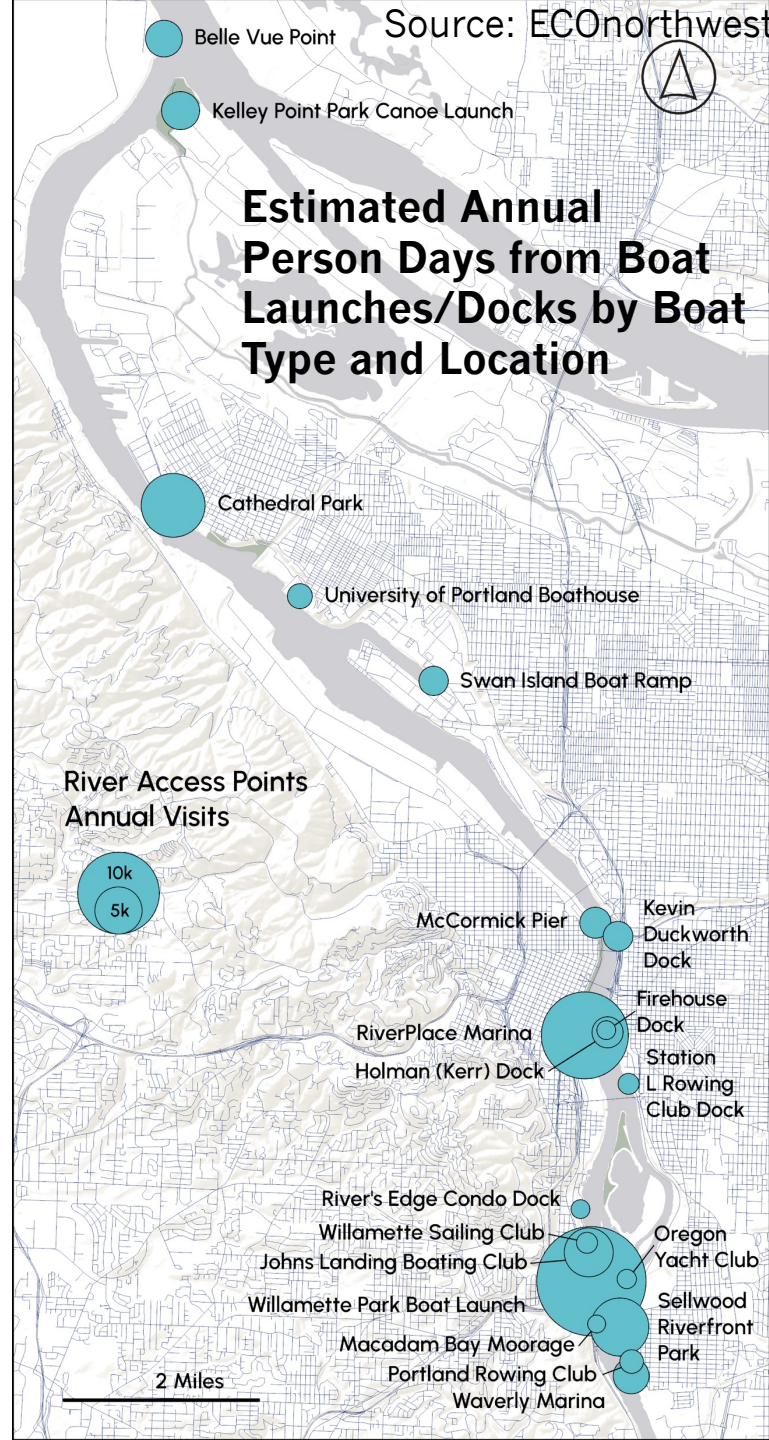
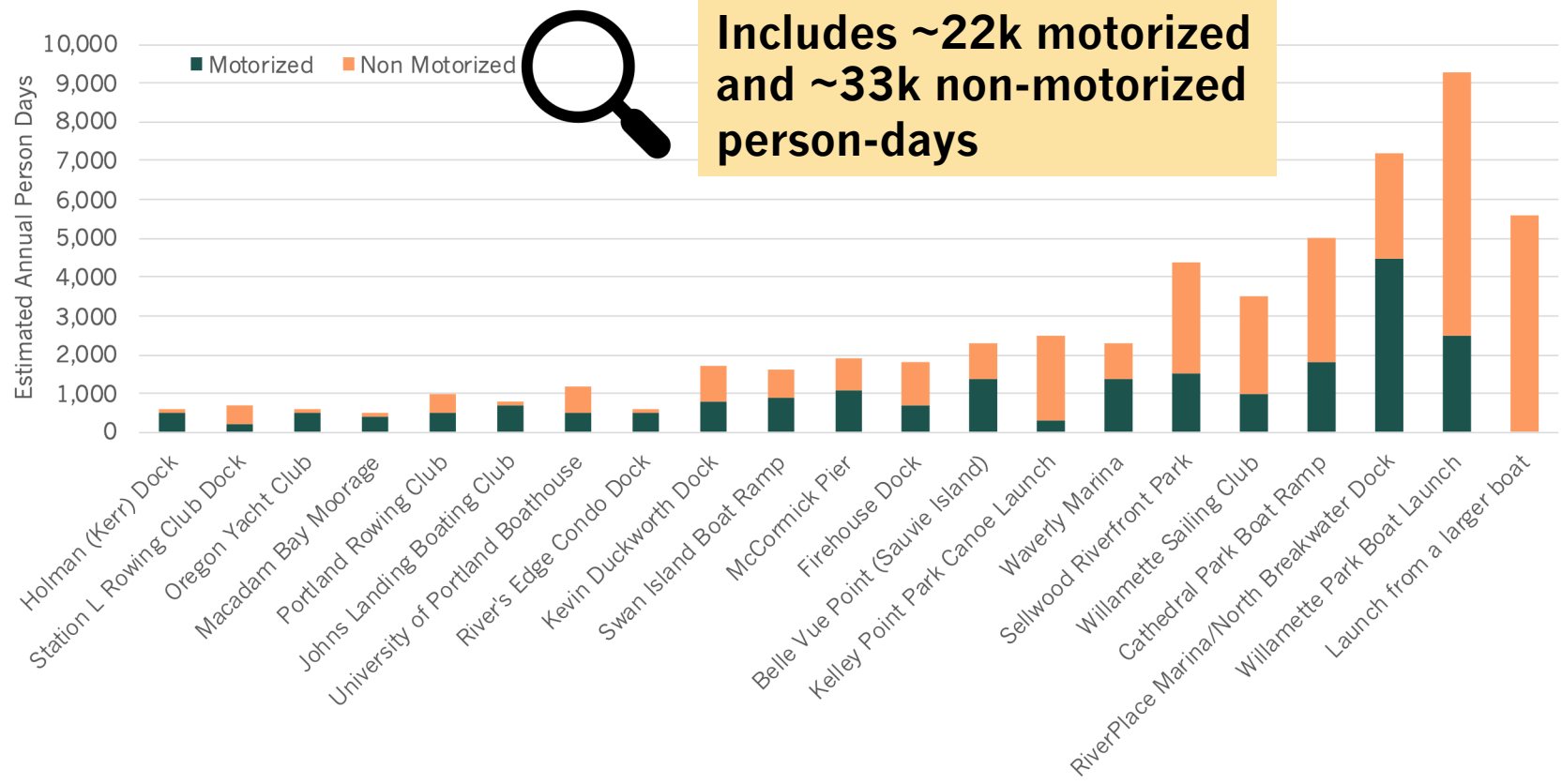


# Water-Based Use Highlight

## Recreational Boating Generates 55,000+ Person-Days Annually



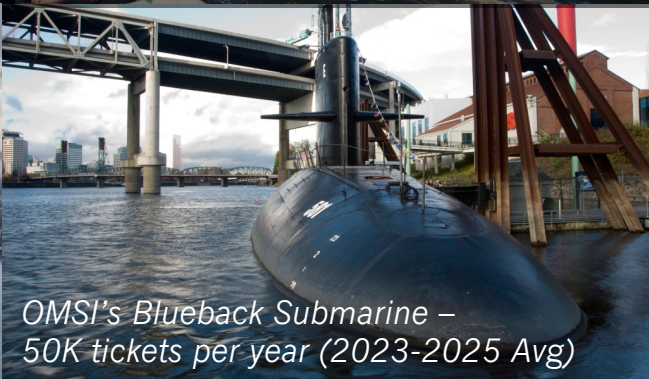
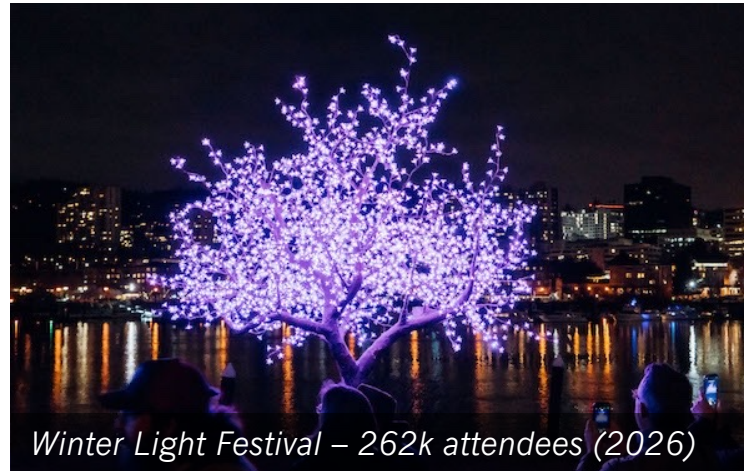
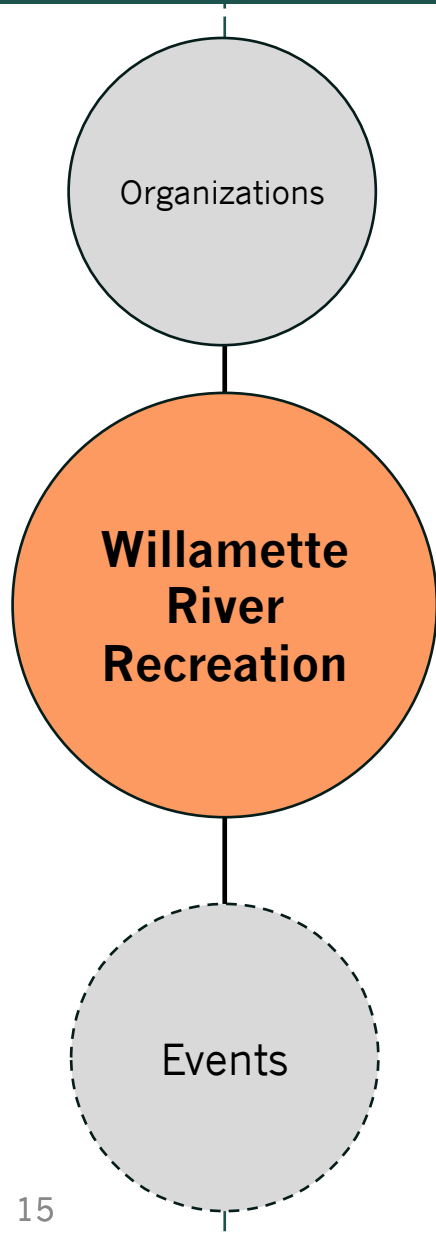
### Estimated Annual Person Days from Boat Launches/Docks by Boat Type and Location



Source: EConorthwest survey and analysis (2026); Placer.ai (2026)

"Person Day" = Any person for any duration on a single day

# More Users Engage with the River at Year-Round Land- and Water-Based Events



***Land- and water-based events in and around the river draw thousands more attendees and generate additional economic value not captured in the analysis***

Image Sources: Top: PDX Pipeline (left), Portland Monthly (center), PDX Pipeline (right); Bottom: Rundida (left), OMSI (center), Golden Dragons PDX (right)

# Spending Measures Economic Activity

## Spending



Measures money spent on recreation trips

Includes food, lodging, fuel, fees, equipment, etc.

Generates local economic activity, jobs, and income

## Market Value

# Consumer Surplus Measures the Net Benefit Recreation Provides

<b>Spending</b> 	<b>Consumer Surplus</b> 
Measures money spent on recreation trips	Measures the values people receive from recreation
Includes food, lodging, fuel, fees, equipment, etc.	Includes valuation of enjoyment, well-being and access (less costs)
Generates local economic activity, jobs, and income	Captures benefits beyond what people actually pay
<b>Market Value</b>	<b>Non-Market Value</b>

# Non-Commercial Recreation Generates Spending and Consumer Surplus in Portland

Non-commercial recreation on the Willamette River generates (annually) an estimated:

**\$121 Million**  
in Spending



**\$190 Million** in  
Consumer Surplus



(2025\$)

## Spending and Consumer Surplus by Activity, 2025

Activity	Spending	Consumer Surplus
Park Use	\$56M	\$88M
Biking	\$57M	\$93M
Fishing	\$2M	\$3M
Non-Motorized Boating	\$4M	\$5M
Motorized Boating	\$1M	\$2M
Pedestrian Use	No data	No data
Swimming	No data	No data
<b>TOTAL RECREATION USE</b>	<b>\$121M</b>	<b>\$190M</b>



Top uses for spending and consumer surplus identified in this study were **land-based recreational activities**

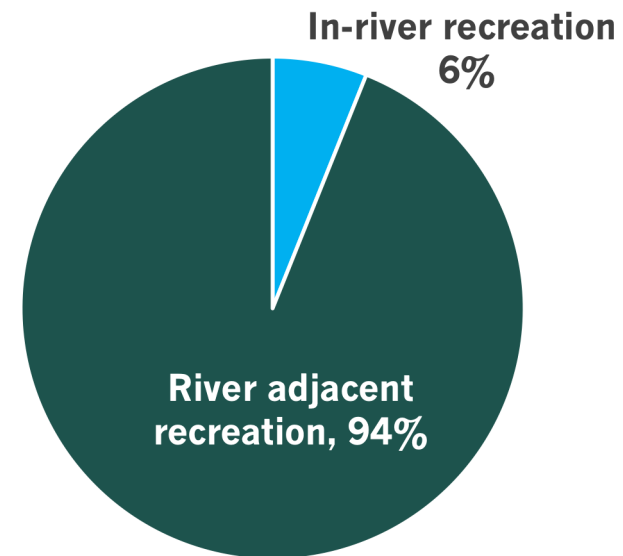
*Data limitations do not fully capture all uses*

# Land-Based Recreation is the Primary Driver of Economic Benefits Today

## Spending and 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



In-river (non-commercial) recreation generates **only 6 percent** of river-related spending, annually



A wide-angle photograph of the Portland, Oregon skyline across the Willamette River. The sky is filled with scattered white clouds. In the foreground, a small motorboat leaves a white wake on the dark water. A suspension bridge is visible on the left side of the frame. The city buildings are a mix of modern glass skyscrapers and older brick structures. A green lawn and trees line the riverbank in the middle ground.

**What Economic Opportunities is Portland Missing Out On for River Recreation?**

## What About Commercial Recreation Use?

- Commercial boating generates **at least 125,000 user days per year**, mostly in the summer (likely more).
- **Commercial use** is more complex to quantify from a range of individual private operators (*including dinner cruises, boat rentals, specialty experiences like floating saunas, etc.*)
- **There is demand for more commercial boating.** Current operators see high utilization in peak season, but the number of options is limited



Image sources: Portland Spirit (right),  
Willamette Jetboat Excursions (left)

# Expand In-River Uses Through New Investments

*In-river uses account for only a small share of economic benefits today; strategic investments should protect and expand these uses.*

- **Natural Capital:** Ensuring clean water suitable for swimming, anticipating climate shifts and hydrologic conditions.
- **Physical Capital:** Expanding access and amenities that invite more people into and onto the water.
- **Social Capital:** Strengthen partnerships that build cultural value of water-centered activity; Reduce regulatory constraints for commercial enterprises.

***Investments in the three types of capital spurs economic activity***



# Continue Strengthening River-Adjacent Recreation

*River-adjacent recreation is the primary driver of economic benefit from the Willamette today. Continued attention and investment could focus on:*

- **Natural Capital:** Stewardship of park and trail areas that maintains ecosystem function and biodiversity.
- **Physical Capital:** Expanding park amenities that expand visit length and engagement with local businesses.
- **Social Capital:** Build data infrastructure to support decision-making; expand public-private partnerships in development and stewardship.

***Investments in the three types of capital spurs economic activity***





What Could Success Look Like For Activating the River?

- **Pittsburgh, PA** (Allegheny, Ohio & Monongahela Rivers)
- **Boise, ID** (Boise River)
- **Milwaukee, WI** (Milwaukee, Menomonee & Kinnickinnic Rivers / Lake Michigan)
- **Minneapolis, MN** (Mississippi River)
- **Vancouver, BC** (False Creek & Burrard Inlet / Coal Harbour / Vancouver Harbour)

## Why these cities?

- ✓ Connection to environmental restoration & stewardship
- ✓ Intentional revitalization effort to increase recreational use of waterfront areas
- ✓ Combination of public and private investments in recent years
- ✓ Available data on key metrics

# Comparison Across Cities: Key Metrics



River Access Points



Riverfront Park Use



Total Investment\*

	<b>15 maintained access points in approx. 16 miles of riverfront (0.94/mi)</b>	<b>590k annual rec. users* in most popular waterfront park (25% of all users)</b>	<b>\$114+ million since 2000 (\$179 per capita)</b>
<b>Portland</b>			
Pittsburgh	<b>Similar</b> (0.97)	<b>Higher</b> (28%) Point State Park	<b>Higher</b> (\$488 pc)
Boise	<b>Higher</b> (1.20)	<b>Higher</b> (37%) Esther Simplot Park	<b>Similar</b> (\$173 pc) – largely since 2015
Milwaukee	<b>Higher</b> (1.23)*	<b>Similar</b> (27%) Pere Marquette Park	<b>Higher</b> (\$300 pc)
Minneapolis	<b>Lower</b> (0.75)	<b>Similar</b> (23%) Mill Ruins and Water Works Park	<b>Similar</b> (\$163 pc) – largely since 2015
Vancouver	<b>Lower</b> (0.80)*	Data not available in CA	<b>Higher</b> (\$203 pc)

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

\*Recreation User = 30-minute visit or longer

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

# Examples of Portland's River Recreation Investments

East Bank Esplanade, 2001 - \$71 million\*



South Waterfront Greenway, 2015 - \$21 million\*



Cathedral Park Swimming Dock, 2024 - \$900k



# Investing in Water Quality



*East Side Big Pipe*

Image Source: City of Portland

- Portland's '**Big Pipe**' project was completed in 2011 through a \$1.4 billion city investment required to meet federal environmental regulation standards
- Projects like the Big Pipe, superfund site cleanup, etc. **are not included** in calculating recreational investments, but critical to maintaining swimmable water quality
- All other case study cities had similar large-scale (often federally-supported or required) investments in environmental remediation that enable recreation

# Comparison Across Cities: Water-Based Recreational Uses

	Swimming Areas	Fishing Areas	Boat Launches	Non-Motorized Rentals	Motorized Rentals	Day Cruises	Water Taxis / Ferries	Floating Venues	Cruise Dock (Port of Call)	Seaplane Base
<b>Portland</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>				
Pittsburgh	O	X	X	X	X	X		X		
Boise	X	X	X	X						
Milwaukee	O	O	X	X	X	X	X	X	O	
Minneapolis	O	X	X	X	O	X	O			
Vancouver	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

**X** = Available    **O** = Limited

# Pittsburgh, PA: Industrial Cleanup to Floating Barges

- History of **industrial use and brownfield sites** along the city's three rivers
- Revitalization & clean up began in early 2000s including a mix of **riverfront park development, connected trails across neighborhoods, and expanded boat access**
- Strong partnership with **nonprofit RiverLife & commercial operators** like the Gateway Clipper and Pittsburgh Kayaks

## Key Finding

Working with a **durable civic intermediary** around the riverfront paired with **visible riverfront programming through partnerships with commercial operations** can continue momentum that spurs greater public and private investment.

## Investment Spotlight: 'Shore Thing' Floating Barge

- 4,800 SF seasonal floating space for recreation and events
- Activities include free yoga, fitness, live music, and art workshops
- Pop-up area for food & drink vendor
- Operated by RiverLife with support from Allegheny County, Waterfront Development Tax Credit Program, foundations, and private donations



Image Source: Riverlife

## Boise, ID: Preservation Paired with Destination Building

- Paired **long-term trail and park preservation** with **building a destination-recreation asset**
- **Recreation reputation** has influenced the park projects in the city, such as the Boise Whitewater Park in-river surf and kayak
- **Greenbelt-connected** recreation economy built around parks following the river
- Used **foundation support, federal grants for wastewater infrastructure, and a voter bond** to maintain clean, swimmable river conditions

Pairing **long-term trail and park preservation** to **ensure a clean, high-quality river** with **destination-recreation assets** (e.g. ‘the Wave’) gives private operators repeat demand for equipment, lessons, guiding, and nearby food and retail.

### Investment Spotlight: ‘The Wave’ in Whitewater Park

- Includes three in-river ‘wave shaper’ features that create a destination for beginner, intermediate, and advanced kayakers and surfers
- Built on an existing intermittent wave in the Boise River near Thurman Mill Dam
- Funded in two phases by the City of Boise, Friends of the Park (nonprofit), and foundation support



Image Source: City of Boise

# Milwaukee, WI: Downtown Public River Access Through Partnerships

- In 1988, the City developed a **clear partnership model** where public investment has paid for riverfront improvements in exchange for public access in development
- **Design standards and TIF districts** created a repeatable development framework for private partnership
- Focus on **combining in-river recreation** with **adjacent uses (restaurants, entertainment)**

## Key Finding

*Public investment for private riverfront improvements that guarantee **robust public access**, paired with **design standards** and **TIF districts** create a repeatable development framework.*

## Investment Spotlight: Downtown RiverWalk

- Accessible three-mile Downtown area with walking paths, parks, and docks
- Partnership between the City and property owners to develop public access in exchange for public financial assistance
- Spurred conversion of underutilized industrial area to mixed-use residential, commercial, recreation, hotels, and entertainment oriented to the river



Image Source: City of Milwaukee

# Minneapolis, MN: Public Land and Philanthropic Investment

- Actively transforming the waterfront, with current strengths in **public land control** combine with **park-philanthropy**
- Nonprofit RiverFirst's fundraised philanthropy combined with state bonds direct the waterfront rebuilding towards **community-forward investment**
- Upper Harbor ties river access to **housing, jobs, commercial space**, and a **regional park**.

## Key Finding

*Still actively being transformed through investment in the waterfront, but its strength is in **public land control** that can partner with strong local **park-philanthropy delivery**.*

## Investment Spotlight: Upper Harbor Terminal

- In-progress project to transform a mile of riverfront into a 20-acre park
- New music venue and riverfront community amenities founded by over \$12 million in grant funding, foundation support, and partnership with CDC
- Part of larger district redevelopment including habitat and stormwater improvements



Image Source: City of Minneapolis

# Vancouver, BC: Catalytic Push for Active Commercial Recreation

- History of **public land redevelopment** and **development-generated public amenities** along the water
- Spurred recently by a greening effort in advance of the **2010 Olympics** to help keep the waterways active and maintained
- Heavily utilized waterways and waterfront with many instances of **private economic activities**, such as **overnight cruise dockings, water taxies, and seaplanes**

## Key Finding

*Cruises, ferries, seaplanes, marinas, water taxies, floating bars/restaurants, and convention uses all reinforce a diverse **public-access waterfront network** combined with status as a dense waterfront economy.*

## Investment Spotlight: Harbor Green Park & Harbor Flight Center

- Spurred by construction of convention center (14 ac. on land, 8 ac. over water) for 2010 Olympics
- Included marine habitat restoration, development of park and trails, and investment in water-oriented retail
- Transformed historic industrial seaplane manufacturing area to a modern recreation attraction



Image Source: Architech Mag

# Recommendations & Next Steps

- **Diversify and enhance access for water-based recreation amenities:** In the river, on the river, by the river. *Lots of potential already in motion!!*
- **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.
- **Develop data collection infrastructure:** fill data gaps to inform future decision-making about river investments.



# ECONorthwest

IMPACT THROUGH INSIGHT

[www.econw.com](http://www.econw.com)

## PORTLAND, OREGON

Power + Light Building  
920 SW 6th Ave, Suite 1400  
Portland, OR 97204  
503-222-6060

## WASHINGTON

Park Place  
1200 Sixth Avenue, Suite 615  
Seattle, WA 98101  
206-823-3060

## CALIFORNIA

9415 Culver Blvd  
#248  
Culver City, CA 90232  
213-218-6740

## BEND, OREGON

2863 NW Crossing Drive,  
Suite 100  
Bend, OR 97703  
458-202-9016

## DENVER, COLORADO

1200 17th Street  
Floor 10  
Denver, CO 80202