

Ashtabula's Revitalization



This factsheet is part of a series focused on revitalization in Great Lakes Areas of Concern.

The city of Ashtabula sits in the northeast corner of Ohio where the Ashtabula River meets Lake Erie. Historically, it was a shipping and industrial community with the river widened and deepened to accommodate large vessels and the shoreline hardened for industry. Little or no natural habitat remained in the river mouth. In the 1900s, chemical plants sprung up along the river, and the water became laden with a multitude of contaminants. In 2021, after years of cleanup, restoration, and monitoring driven by the Ashtabula River Partnership, the waterway was removed from the list of Great Lakes Areas of Concern (AOC). The recovery of the Ashtabula River has inspired local interest in water-based recreation, increased tourism, and encouraged new businesses to settle on the riverfront.

Restored fish habitat helps bring life to the river

Through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, what amounts to about 248,000 dump truck loads of contaminated sediment were removed from the Ashtabula River. To help restore fish populations, about a half mile of habitat structures were placed at what is known as the 5 ½ Slip, situated exactly in the middle of what was the AOC. The artificial habitat provides spawning sites as well as refuge for larval fish, such as the native northern pike. Thousands of feet of shoreline were also restored there, as well as upland wetlands. As a result, the river once again lives up to its Algonquin name—pronounced Hash-tah-buh-lah—which means “river of many fish.”

Fishing, boating, kayaking and more

Between 2008 and 2017—as the cleanup progressed—pleasure and rental boat registrations in the county increased by 42% and 28%, respectively.ⁱ The fish habitat restoration in the river led the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in 2017 to begin stocking it with steelhead, which has become a strong economic driver in the region. Kayaking, paddle boarding, and other water sports continued to grow in Ashtabula River with the addition of Harbor Yak Outfitters in 2017—this rental business annually serves about 4,500 people, both residents and tourists.

The harbor district is the hotspot

Ashtabula's harbor district is amidst a revival. New businesses have cropped up, many in historic buildings that harken back to the previous century when the harbor was a shipping center. These new establishments are bringing back a neighborhood that not long ago was somewhat abandoned. Now, 14 restaurants, taprooms, boutiques and other retail shops, beckon both residents and tourists to the waterfront. In addition, some residents are now calling it home—eight townhomes on Bridge Street with river views opened in 2019, and more housing development is slated to come.

Ashtabula has become a destination

Whether visitors to Ashtabula are coming to kayak on the river, visit wineries or museums, or shop in the harbor district, tourism has been increasing. A 2016 report by Tourism Economics showed that in Ashtabula County, visitors generated over \$50 million in taxes.ⁱⁱ In 2022, overall tourism numbers broke records set in 2021. This growth has driven new development. For example, the Riverbend Hotel is scheduled to open in the harbor district in 2023. With 46 rooms and views of the river and its historic lift bridge, this will be the first hotel to open in Ashtabula in over 100 years.

This publication was funded by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Sources include [Assessing the Investment](#) (Great Lakes Commission), as well as others, which are listed at iiseagrant.org/publications/ashtabulas-revitalization/. For more information about Great Lakes Areas of Concern, visit greatlakesmud.org.

By the Numbers



Contaminated sediment removed would fill

248,000
dump trucks



\$434 million
in tourism sales
in 2016



27 new businesses
in the harbor district
2010–17



\$21.6 million
increase in
home property values
2010–16