

Muskegon's Revitalization



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

In the mid-to-late 1800s, 47 sawmills were in business along Muskegon Lake. For decades, these mills and other industries used the lake as a dumping ground for debris and contaminants. In this Great Lakes Area of Concern, the natural shoreline was hardened with industrial debris and the lake and its wetlands became a stew of sawmill waste, chemicals, and other detritus. Many residents of Muskegon, Michigan turned their back on the lake, and downtown buildings faced away from it. In more recent years, community and government mobilization has drastically changed Muskegon's waterways for the better. As a result, the city has seen a rise in waterfront development, recreation opportunities, and tourism.

Clearing out old wood fosters fish habitat

Restoring plant and wildlife habitat in Muskegon Lake began with clearing out lots of debris—more than 110,000 tons of sawmill waste was removed from the lake. Other projects restored wetlands and created passage for fish to move freely throughout the waterways. At Veterans Memorial Park, once considered “Michigan’s Most Beautiful Mile,” more wetlands and fish passages were restored along the Muskegon River. Opportunities to fish and spot wildlife are part of the reason that residents and tourists now spend much more time at the lake each season than before restoration.ⁱ

The party is at the lake

Muskegon County has become a boating, fishing, and outdoor recreation center, with the total value of additional recreation due to the cleanup estimated at \$27.9 million annually.ⁱⁱ The revived lakefront also brings residents and tourists waterside for dozens of festivals and events, celebrating music, food, drink, art, recreation, and even the city and the cleaned-up lake. In 2022, after the worst of the pandemic, an estimated 14,000 attended the Muskegon Lakeshore Art Festival. Participation in the 2022 Taste of Muskegon Festival exceeded expectations by thousands.

Muskegon now hosts lakefront living

At one time, locals avoided the polluted lake altogether, but now people are moving into new housing adjacent to Muskegon Lake. For example, Terrace Point Landing has 70 cottage-style homes, including many lakefront properties. Nearby are Highpoint Flats—the old Hackley Union National Bank building transformed into luxury apartments and Berkshire Muskegon, offering senior housing. Based on home sale prices, a Grand Valley State University 2019 study estimated the value of shoreline improvements to be \$7.9 million.ⁱⁱⁱ

Great Lakes cruises say yes to Muskegon

A Great Lakes cruise ship made an unplanned stop in Muskegon in 2015 and after that the Pearl Mist booked visits to Muskegon Lake multiple times a year. In 2022, Muskegon was a scheduled stop for four cruise lines that are back in business after a two-year pandemic hiatus. Bookings were 25% higher than in 2019 and 17 stops were slated for Muskegon. Each cruise ship brings up to 200 passengers ashore to shop, eat, and visit local museums.

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

By the Numbers



Contaminated sediment removed would fill

76,000
dump trucks



\$7.9 million
increase in home values due to shoreline restoration



Nearly
2.5 miles
of restored Muskegon Lake shoreline



\$47 million
in new waterfront development as of 2018