

# Sheboygan's Revitalization



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

**S**ituated on the western shores of Lake Michigan, Sheboygan, Wisconsin was once home to a variety of industries, such as lumber mills and tanneries. Industrial waste, along with urban and agricultural runoff, led to high levels of pollution in the Sheboygan River, making fishing and recreational activities unsafe and leading to it being listed as an Area of Concern. To re-establish the health of the river as well as the city, the U.S. EPA and state and community partners joined together to support the cleanup of contaminated sediment and restore the river's wildlife habitats. As a result, Sheboygan's economy, waterfront development, and recreational opportunities have seen substantial growth.

## Life comes to the river

Many restoration projects have made the riverfront safer and more appealing to residents and tourists while also improving plant and wildlife habitats. In the Wildwood Island Area, harmful invasive species were removed across 18 acres, and native vegetation was planted for fish and bird populations. The restored Kiwanis Park shoreline, which includes three acres of improved wildlife habitat, now has a kayak launch and weekly public events. Esslingen Park is home to restored wetland and stream habitat, as well as its annual namesake event, Esslingen Fest, established in 2017.

## Sparking a recreation revival

A cleaner river has meant more water-based recreation in Sheboygan. From boating to fishing to kayaking, each activity has seen a rise in interest. In 2012, the Sailing Education Association of Sheboygan began offering boating and educational opportunities to residents and visitors, and they opened a new central location in 2018 to expand efforts to meet increased demand. From 2010 to 2015, the number of charter captains using Sheboygan's port as their home base rose by 14%, and fishing charter boats can be found all along the downtown waterfront.<sup>i</sup>

## Old industry becomes new housing

Sheboygan's remediation and restoration projects have encouraged developers and city planners to build along the waterfront. In 2017, the 88-unit Portscape Apartments was constructed on the site of a former coal yard. A former tannery building was also renovated into Badger State Lofts, with 118 units. In 2020, on the old Kingsbury Beer Brewing site, the Kingsbury Village apartment complex was built. Each of these housing projects is a brief walk to the river—near water-based recreation and other new developments.

## The riverfront is now a development hub

The Lakeshore Technical College moved into its new location on the Sheboygan River, redeveloping a boat repair business. Restaurants have opened their doors along the riverfront since the cleanup, like the New York-inspired Millie's Deli and the French-style Harbor Café. In Kiwanis Park, a beer garden called Der Sheboygan Biergarten began serving in 2019 and holds events throughout the summer. And in 2022, the luxury boutique Watershed Hotel and Event Center opened.

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## By the Numbers



Contaminated  
sediment removed  
would fill  
**160,000**  
dump trucks



**300**  
new housing units  
near the river—  
a **\$60 million**  
investment



More than  
**3.4 miles**  
of shoreline restored



**32% increase**  
in visitor spending  
in Sheboygan County  
2010–17