

# 2024-2026 Community Engagement Event Summary

Lake Superior Headwaters Sustainability Partnership

*Prepared by*

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## HEADWATERS PARTNERSHIP

### VISION STATEMENT AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

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*The Lake Superior Headwaters Sustainability Partnership establishes an inclusive and intentional framework for how and where we work to achieve a thriving estuary landscape and community. The principles of sustainability, resiliency, and equity guide our approach to managing our natural resources by including economic development and community health and well-being considerations.*

*In order to achieve this vision, we need to:*

- Take a holistic approach to protecting and restoring the natural resources of the St. Louis River Estuary and surrounding watersheds that can be scaled up geographically over time,
- Build and improve the existing capacity and processes that enable us to work collaboratively,
- Work to improve ecological integrity and resiliency while furthering a sustainable relationship between humans and the environment,
- Incorporate human community needs and provide access to ecosystem services in an equitable manner,
- Develop trust and legitimacy in our efforts through knowledge sharing and effective facilitation, and
- Proactively identify emerging issues that may negatively impact achieving a healthy and thriving landscape.

# 1 OVERVIEW

The Lake Superior Headwaters Sustainability Partnership (Headwaters Partnership, Partnership) was created in 2021 and currently connects over 80 individuals from 30 different agencies, organizations, local governments, and tribal entities to protect, restore, and steward the Headwaters Partnership region in the St. Louis River watershed with an overarching vision for a thriving estuary landscape and community.

The Headwaters Partnership region encompasses 1,020 square miles in Minnesota and Wisconsin and coincides with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency-designated Area of Concern (AOC) boundary for the St. Louis River. The Partnership defined nine geographic zones within the region based loosely on HUC-12 watersheds with minor modifications to group areas with similar natural resources or cultural features.

**Figure 1. Headwaters Partnership Region**



## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Headwaters Partnership’s shared Vision and Guiding Principles (previous page) serve as the foundation of the Partnership’s collaborative approach to work towards a thriving estuary landscape and community. Inherent in this structure is a commitment to strengthen our collaborative capacity, with an understanding that

both community and natural resources are at the core of this work. We do this by connecting with each other, sharing knowledge, learning together, and generating ideas, through opportunities within the Partnership and with the greater community. This shared practice, and a desire to expand the practice to learn from communities and support partner efforts, formed the impetus for focusing on and enlarging our community engagement approach throughout the past two years.

In 2024, the Headwaters Partnership began a multi-year, partner-driven visioning process in three geographic zones in the St. Louis River estuary to increase collaborative capacity and help direct future work. This Landscape Stewardship Vision (Lake Superior Headwaters Sustainability Partnership, 2026) resulted in the development of several tools for natural resource partners: an interactive vision map, a set of stewardship guidelines, and a document to guide use of the vision. A Networking Session held at the 2024 St. Louis River Summit also generated ideas for the Headwaters Partnership to serve as a hub of natural resources data and information to partners and the broader public. Training opportunities including an Art of Hosting workshop and a Participatory Action Research field trip were offered to partners and community members to enhance development of community engagement skills.

At the same time, a focus was made on engagement with the larger community in the Headwaters Partnership region. This effort began by connecting with a group of community leaders during a shared dinner, called the Heart of the Estuary. Community leaders voiced ideas, values, questions, and concerns during this interactive listening session, which ultimately led to the creation of the Headwaters Partnership Principles for Engagement. These Principles for Engagement also helped to inform development of partner tools to support connections with communities, including a Community Engagement Toolkit (Lake Superior Headwaters Sustainability Partnership, 2026c) and **Community Atlas**. In 2025, a Community Council was convened to more deeply guide the Partnership's work with communities. The Community Council's thoughts and ideas helped inform the Community Engagement Toolkit and Community Atlas, and in large part formed detailed practices and strategies for community engagement, which are included in the Community Engagement Framework (Lake Superior Headwaters Sustainability Partnership, 2026b).

The Community Engagement Framework was developed to capture the values, commitments, and practices partners and community leaders have identified as essential for meaningful engagement. In total, the Community Engagement Framework reflects all of the Partnership's learning from 2023 to 2026 through collaborative work, community conversations, and the guidance of the Headwaters Partnership Community Council. The framework supports the Headwaters Partnership by:

- **Clarifying how we work together**

Outlining Partnership commitments that strengthen collaboration, shared learning, open communication, and coordination across organizations to support meaningful engagement.

- **Guiding how we engage with community**

Presenting a set of Principles and Practices for Engagement that translate partnership values into practical approaches for building relationships, supporting inclusive participation, and grounding engagement in place.

- **Connecting partners to tools that support the work**

Linking partners to practical resources, including the Community Atlas, for understanding community context and the Community Engagement Toolkit for designing engagement plans aligned with the Principles and Practices for Engagement

As a result of the connections made through the visioning process, trainings, events, and conversations, the Headwaters Partnership was able to develop and strengthen relationships with partners, community members, leaders, and organizations. Many of the partners and community members attended multiple events and several served on the Headwaters Partnership Community Council. Strengthened relationships with community organizations made it possible to co-lead events to reach a broader audience, including an Open Space event called Gathering Grounds. Additionally, by connecting with the St. Louis River Alliance (SLRA), the Headwaters Partnership was able to learn from community members in attendance at SLRA events, which helped inform both the visioning process and community engagement work.

The information compiled and analyzed for this report came from the 2025 St. Louis River Summit Participatory Action Research field trip conversations, St. Louis River Alliance events, Gathering Grounds open space event held jointly with the Duluth Area Outdoor Alliance, and two online questionnaires – a River Reflections form and a Frequently Asked Questions survey.

## 1.2 APPROACH

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The Headwaters Partnership community engagement approach was multi-faceted, with a focus on creating opportunities to connect, learn from each other, generate ideas, and gain tools and skills to collaborate within the Partnership and with the larger community. To do this, we took an approach involving several strategies:

- Provide partners and community members with tools and skills development
- Partner with community organizations and members
- Meet people where they gather
- Ask open-ended questions
- Design engagement events with participant led agendas and discussions
- Include activities providing connections to place-based natural resources

The opportunity to hold these events was made possible by strengthening relationships with partners, community leaders and members, and community organizations including the St. Louis River Alliance and the Duluth Area Outdoor Alliance.

At all of the events, and in online surveys, open ended questions were asked of participants, in order to better understand community uses, values, needs, and concerns related to the St. Louis River Estuary. The events and questionnaire responses in this summary focus on events held with the broader community. Partner specific trainings, workshops, etc. informed prior work, but are not summarized here.

Events held by the St. Louis River Alliance centered around on-the-ground family friendly activities, food and camaraderie, and conversations driven by participants. Events and conversations that are specifically centered around Allouez Bay and Wisconsin Point are summarized in a separate report (2025-2026 River Activities Questionnaire Findings). Attendees of the Gathering Ground Open Space event included outdoor recreation groups, natural resource managers, municipal parks and recreation departments, tribal partners, and interested residents. Results from these events helped inform much of the work of the Partnership over the past two years and will continue to shape the Partnership’s role in the community in the future.

## 2 EVENTS & QUESTIONNAIRES

This section provides a list of the events that informed this summary, a brief summary of event participants, and a list of the conversation prompts and survey questions used.

### 2.1 EVENT DESCRIPTIONS

A wide variety of events (Table 1) were held in various locations throughout the Partnership region throughout 2024-2026. Thoughts, questions, concerns, ideas, and interests generated in conversations during the following events and online questionnaires are summarized in this report.

**Table 1. Event Descriptions, Coordinating Organizations, Dates, and Event Locations**

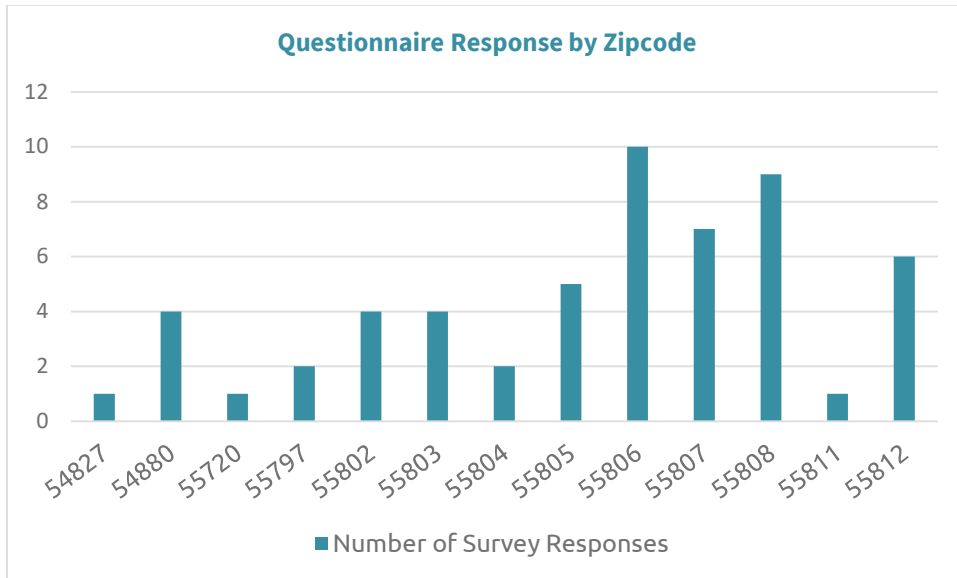
Event/Questionnaire	Coordination	Date	Location
St. Louis River Summit Networking Session*	Headwaters Partnership	March 2024	University of Wisconsin – Superior Superior, WI
Heart of the Estuary Dinner*	Headwaters Partnership	January 2025	Spirit Valley Duluth, MN
St. Louis River Summit Participatory Action Research Field Trip	Headwaters Partnership	March 2025	University of Wisconsin – Superior Superior, WI
Community Atlas Training*	Headwaters Partnership	March 2025	Online
Art of Hosting Training*	Headwaters Partnership	April 2025	Clyde Iron Works Duluth, MN
Bayside Sounds	St. Louis River Alliance	August 2025	Woodstock Bay Superior, WI
Water Wednesday Clean-up	St. Louis River Alliance	May 2025	Lincoln Park Pavilion Duluth, MN
Water Wednesdays	St. Louis River Alliance	June &	Harrison Community Center

Event/Questionnaire	Coordination	Date	Location
		July 2025	Duluth, MN
Beginner Fishing at Perch Lake	St. Louis River Alliance	June 2025	Perch Lake Landing Duluth, MN
Biking the Cross City Trail AOC Tour	St. Louis River Alliance	June 2025	Cross City Trail - River Corridor Duluth, MN
Community Paddle at Chambers Grove	St. Louis River Alliance	July 2025	St. Louis River at Chambers Grove Park Duluth, MN
Ecology Paddle	St. Louis River Alliance	July 2025	St. Louis River at Munger Landing Duluth, MN
River Orientation & Trip Planning Event	St. Louis River Alliance	August 2025	Morgan Park Community Center Duluth, MN
Gathering Grounds: Building Connections for Land and Water	Headwaters Partnership / Duluth Outdoor Area Alliance	October 2025	University of Wisconsin – Superior Superior, WI
Riverfront Memories	St. Louis River Alliance	October 2025	Chambers Grove Park Duluth, MN
Frequently Asked Questions Questionnaire	St. Louis River Alliance	Summer- Fall 2025	Online
St. Louis River Reflections Questionnaire	St. Louis River Alliance / Headwaters Partnership	Summer- Fall 2025	Online
Headwaters Partnership Community Council*	Headwaters Partnership	Fall- Winter 2025/2026	Minnesota Land Trust office Duluth, MN

*\*Summary not included in this report but used to drive increased collaborative capacity and future direction of the Headwaters Partnership.*

## 2.2 PARTICIPANT SUMMARY

The above events and questionnaires held by the Headwater Partnership, St. Louis River Alliance, and Duluth Outdoor Area Alliance were attended by over 500 participants of all age levels and representing various neighborhoods throughout the region. The figure below provides information on survey respondents by zip code (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Number of Questionnaire Responses by Zip code** (includes St. Louis River Summit – Participatory Action Research Survey, Gathering Grounds Survey, St. Louis River Reflections, Survey, and FAQs Survey)

## 2.3 CONVERSATION PROMPTS AND SURVEY QUESTIONS

During conversations at events, on prompt cards, mapped locations, and online surveys, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions.

### Questions for Event Participants and Survey Respondents:

- Where is your favorite place to visit/recreate/place of importance?
- What are your favorite activities? How do you like to interact with the St. Louis River and estuary landscape?
- What memories or stories do you have about the St. Louis River and estuary?
- Is there anything that prevents you from experiencing the area?
- Do you have any questions or concerns related to the St. Louis River or estuary?
- What does the best possible future for this place look like? If you were to envision a thriving St. Louis River estuary, what would it look like?
- Are there any topics or activities you'd like to learn more about related to the St. Louis River?

At the Gathering Grounds Open Space event (which focused on connecting conservation and recreation) in addition to asking the above questions, attendees developed their own questions and topics of discussion thereby making the event entirely participatory led.

**Gathering Grounds**  
Building Connections  
for Land & Water

Join Us  
**10.10.25**  
YELLOW JACKET UNION  
Superior, WI

LAKE SUPERIOR headwaters  
DULUTH AREA OUTDOOR ALLIANCE  
DAOA

**'How do we connect conservation and recreation for a thriving watershed and healthy community?'**

The Duluth Area Outdoor Alliance and the Headwaters Partnership invite you to a collaborative open space for connection, conversation, and collective visioning.

**Your voice and interests matter and will help shape the agenda!**

We're bringing together nonprofits, agencies, and community members to explore how stewardship and recreation can work hand-in-hand.

### 3 WHAT WE LEARNED

This section presents a compilation of themes and quotes from conversations and community responses to the questions in Section 2.3 documented during the above-mentioned events and through online questionnaires (Table 1) over the course of 2024-2026. Results are presented for places of importance, activities, barriers, questions and concerns, and desired future conditions.

#### 3.1 PLACES OF IMPORTANCE

Most Frequently Mentioned Places & Context of Mentions

1. **Jay Cooke State Park** (~45 mentions): hiking, walking, running, scenic value, family memories, river access, and seasonal recreation

2. **Chambers Grove** (~38 mentions): canoe and kayak launching, family paddling, wildlife viewing, and a quiet, protected river experience
3. **Clough Island/Spirit Island Area** (~34 mentions): swimming, picnics, community paddles, restoration
4. **Dwight's Point** (~31 mentions): camping, paddling stopovers, boreal forest experience, quiet and remote feel
5. **Pokegama Bay** (~29 mentions): ice skating, paddling, wildlife, safety and water-level concerns
6. **Boy Scout Landing** (~26 mentions): fishing, canoe access, family outings, historical memories
7. **Oliver Landing/Oliver Bridge area** (~24 mentions): childhood memories, fishing and swimming, informal access, river identity
8. **Superior Municipal Forest** (~22 mentions): cross-country skiing, boreal forest experience, four season access, quiet recreation, stewardship discussions
9. **Wisconsin Point / Minnesota Point** (~21 mentions): hiking, swimming, birding, reflection, historical and cultural memories, education, and stewardship
10. **Morgan Park** (~18 mentions): river identity discussion, swimming safety questions, restoration perceptions, community access

### Secondary Places Mentioned (10-15 mentions each)

- Barker's Island
- Tallas Island
- Allouez Bay
- Mission Creek
- Magney-Snively Natural Area
- Perch Lake
- Red River Run
- Fond du Lac area

## 3.2 ACTIVITIES

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The current ways people connect with the estuary landscape tend to be informal, low-barrier, and year-round through hiking, walking, running, and biking near the St. Louis River, its tributaries, and lower areas in the estuary and bays in Lake Superior. Paddling, on the river and in the bays, has strong cultural and social significance and is tied to memories, community events, and learning. Fishing and swimming are frequently mentioned activities and are often mentioned alongside concerns about fish health, contamination, and water quality; as well as water safety and access. Quiet social activities for all ages feature high in abundance and are often focused on wildlife observation and picnicking. Camping is a high interest despite limited availability. Winter activities are highly mentioned. Environmental and stewardship activities, while smaller in number, were felt to be deeply meaningful and often described with pride and long-term connection. Desired future activities focus on access, safety, comfort, and social spaces and experiences, rather than high-impact recreation.

**Table 2. Favorite Activities and Ways of Interacting with the St. Louis River Estuary**

Current Activity	Examples	# of Mentions
Hiking / Walking	hiking, walking, trail running, nature walks, using riverfront and forest trails, Waabizheshikana Trail	~85
Paddling	canoeing, kayaking, whitewater, family and community paddles	~78
Fishing	fishing, ice fishing, family fishing, subsistence fishing	~60
Birdwatching / Wildlife Viewing	birding, watching eagles, pelicans, otters, frogs	~38
Swimming	swimming, wading, beach use	~42
Biking	trail biking, road biking, family biking, Munger Trail	~26
Camping	island camping, state park camping	~29
Winter Recreation	cross-country skiing, ice skating, snowshoeing	~22
Picnicking / Relaxing	picnics, sitting by water, reflection, quiet enjoyment	~21
Environmental Stewardship	wild rice seeding, restoration, cleanups	~19
Photography / Nature Appreciation	taking photos, scenic enjoyment	~12

**Table 3. Desired Future Activities**

Desired Activity	Examples	# of Mentions
Swimming	safe swimming, cleaner water, confidence to swim	~30
Paddling Access & Rentals	kayak/canoe rentals, easier launches	~27
Places to Sit & Gather	benches, cafés, picnic areas, hang-out spots	~26
More Trails & Connections	walking paths, trail connections, accessibility	~25
Camping Opportunities	more campsites, island camping, overnight trips	~23

Desired Activity	Examples	# of Mentions
Fishing with Confidence	eating fish safely, better information	~22
Education & Guided Experiences	learning about river health, tours, signage, exploring islands	~21
Community Events & Social Use	group paddles, festivals, shared activities	~18
Wildlife Observation Spaces	birding areas, quiet zones, viewing platforms	~17
Winter Use Support	ice safety, winter access, skating areas	~14
Youth & Family Activities	kid-friendly access, family programming	~13
Stewardship Opportunities	volunteering, restoration participation	~12

### 3.3 MEMORIES

Memories and stories about the St. Louis River and estuary are most strongly shaped by nature, shared experiences, paddling and fishing traditions, and deep emotional connections to specific places. Stories are often expressed as childhood memories and reinforced through family, healing, and stewardship over time.

**Themes in Memories and Stories** (in order of most frequently mentioned)

1. **Nature and Wildlife Experiences** – emotional, sensory, and observational experiences with nature (sunsets reflecting off the river; hearing bugs, birds, frogs; watching pelicans, sturgeon, and otters; and deer swim to islands)
2. **Family, Friends, and Social Bonds** – shared experiences and relationships formed around river experiences (community paddles; fishing, paddling, and birdwatching and relaxing with family and friends of all ages)
3. **Paddling and On-the-Water Experiences** – river travel (exploring bays and islands through the estuary) is a central memory-making activity
4. **Place-based Attachment and Favorite Spots** – many strong emotional ties to specific locations on and off the river

5. **Childhood and Growing up on the River** – childhood experiences (fishing and swimming; skiing and running; family time) shaped lifelong attachments to the river
6. **Fishing Traditions** – fishing as recreation, sustenance, tradition, and cultural identity and another key memory-making activity, especially with family
7. **Restoration, Stewardship, and Change Over Time** – an awareness of environmental change and participation in taking care (reseeding wild rice; being part of the cleanup)
8. **Healing and Reflection** – emotional healing, spiritual meaning, and personal growth connected to the river (finding peace and solace; touching wild rice to remember a family member; bittersweet memories after the flood; the river speaks to me)
9. **Seasonal Connections** – a strong four season use and memories tied to seasonal change (late season paddling, frozen river walks and ice-skating, cross-country skiing)
10. **Risk, Loss, and Respect for the River** – stories of danger and learning to respect the river (fast water and cold conditions; canoe accidents; falling through the ice)

## 3.4 BARRIERS

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Most barriers expressed by participants and questionnaire respondents fall into four overlapping gaps and include the following, along with specific themes and direct quotes:

**Information Gaps** - what is safe, where to go, what is allowed

- **Water Quality and Safety Concerns** (pollution concern, fish consumption concerns, swimming safety, seasonal risk)
  - “I don’t eat a lot of fish due to mercury pollution.”
  - “Is the water safe to swim in?”
  - “Are fish caught in the river safe to eat?”
  - “Concerned about contamination and sediment.”
  - “Fast water, cold water, ice safety.”
- **Information and Awareness Gaps** (lack of knowledge, unclear information)
  - “I don’t know anything about the health of the river.”
  - “I’m not sure where the estuary is.”
  - “I don’t know what’s available.”
  - “What does the estuary mean?”
  - “Where can I go to canoe or hike?”
  - “Include estuary information in recruiting materials.”

### Trust Gaps - historic pollution vs. current reality

- **Cultural and Historical Barriers** (legacy pollution, cultural mistrust, identity)  
“Historically as kids we were told to stay away from the water.”  
“Hard to convince neighbors it’s safe now.”  
“Some people don’t feel like a river community.”

### Access Gaps – transportation, amenities, equity

- **Transportation and Logistics** (equipment access, difficulties in transportation)  
“I don’t live nearby to it or anything, so it can be hard to get out there.”  
“I need a reason to make it a destination.”  
“Where can I affordably rent or borrow a boat?”  
“Hard to transport kayaks or canoes.”
- **Equity and Inclusion** (cost, accessibility, exclusion)  
“People can’t afford to use the train, but want to ride it.”  
“Lack of access for youth and families.”  
“Not enough representation.”
- **Access Barriers** (limited access, physical barriers, lack of known entry points)  
“Railroad should continue to provide access.”  
“Limited places to access it.”  
“Hard to get to the river without knowing where to go.”  
“Private land and railroads block access.”

### Capacity Gaps – time constraints. Many people also say they want to engage, but need an invitation, reassurance, or clarity first.

- **Capacity and Time Constraints**  
“Too little time, too many other chores.”  
“Volunteer numbers are down.”
- **Social Barriers** (belonging, motivation, relevance)  
“I’m not involved and not interested.”  
“People don’t feel welcome.”  
“Don’t see others like them.”  
“Belief that one person doesn’t matter.”

## 3.5 QUESTIONS & CONCERNS

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Overall, current perceptions of the St. Louis River are shaped by optimism about environmental improvements, but cautiously, due to lingering pollution stigma and in some cases, lack of public trust. Perception lags behind

reality, and whether positive or negative, connects back to knowledge, messaging, and experience. An opportunity to improve public perception and understanding through education and engagement exists.

Community members are excited to learn more, especially about river ecology, flora and fauna, history, and restoration concepts; eager to ask questions centered around future concerns for the health of the river; have a desire to balance conservation with recreation and development; and show interest in helping to care for the river. Improving access and equity, creating small scale, intergenerational events, and hands-on opportunities will all bring further personal connections between people and the St. Louis River estuary.

In addition to questions and concerns in the above summary of barriers, participants and survey respondents had questions such as the following:

**Natural resource related:**

- “Can you eat wild rice safely?”
- “What fish can you catch in the river and what kinds can you eat?”
- “What contaminants are in the fish?”
- “Is there evidence that fish (sturgeon) are recovering?”
- “What kinds of birds can you see on the river?”
- “Are cattails invasive to the St. Louis River?”
- “It is common to see swans on the St. Louis River?”
- “What factors contribute to how much water is released from Thomson Dam?”
- “How can sturgeon continue to spawn with the dam on the river?”
- “Why do sturgeon jump out of the river?”
- “How much of the river contains rapids?”
- “What does the rest of the river look like?”
- “What are the limits/boundaries of the estuary and where does it start?”
- “Is the water always this fast? this low?”

**River clean up and health:**

- Will upriver mining reverse the progress that the AOC has made?
- How far are we in making areas of concern less concerning?
- What happens after the AOC is delisted and who will monitor the river?
- What is the difference between remediation and restoration?
- When will the contamination remediation on the Thomson Reservoir be completed?
- Do the parties responsible for the pollution help pay for the AOC projects?

**Stewardship and recreation:**

- “What can community members do to keep the river clean?”
- “How can we advocate for AOC work?”
- “How do we build a network between stewardship and recreation?”

“How do we balance conservation and recreation?”

“How can people help, but not feel overwhelmed?”

“What is the City’s schedule for building new sections of the Marten Trail?”

## 3.6 DESIRED FUTURE CONDITIONS

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### **Confidence that the river is clean, safe, and healthy – for people and ecosystems.**

- “A cleaner river with fish you can eat.”
- “Safe swimming.”
- “Water that people trust again.”
- “Healthy sediment and water quality.”
- “Continued improvement after delisting.”
- “No backsliding after AOC work is done.”

### **A river that supports native species, intact habitat, thriving ecosystems, and long-term resilience.**

- “Healthy fish and wildlife populations.”
- “Sturgeon recovery.”
- “Thriving wild rice beds.”
- “Functioning wetlands.”

### **Thoughtful, balanced access that allows use without damaging the river or landscape.**

- “Access without loving it to death.”
- “Balance recreation and conservation.”
- “Low-impact recreation.”
- “Not overdeveloped.”
- “Quiet areas protected.”
- “Trails that don’t fragment habitat.”

### **A river that feels accessible and welcoming to everyone.**

- “Access for people with disabilities.”
- “Affordable opportunities.”
- “Youth and family-friendly.”
- “People feel welcome.”
- “Transportation options to get there.”
- “Not just for outdoor experts.”

### **Better understanding of the river, its health, and how to engage with it.**

- “Clear messaging about water safety.”
- “Better signage.”

- “Explain what an estuary is.”
- “Central place for information.”
- “Education for all ages.”
- “Visibility of restoration progress.”

**Ongoing care led by community, not just agencies.**

- “Community ownership of the river.”
- “More people involved in stewardship.”
- “Volunteer opportunities that feel manageable.”
- “Partnerships across groups.”
- “Civic pride in the river.”

**Spaces that support social connection and personal meaning**

- “Places to sit and enjoy the river.”
- “Gathering spaces.”
- “Community events.”
- “Quiet reflection.”
- “A place to bring family and friends.”

**Infrastructure and conditions that make recreation feel safe and easy.**

- “Safe swimming areas.”
- “Clearly marked access points.”
- “Boat launches that are easy to use.”
- “Kayak and canoe rentals.”
- “Winter safety information.”

**Assurance that progress won’t be undone by new impacts.**

- “Protection from future pollution.”
- “Careful review of new development.”
- “Industrial uses that don’t harm the river.”
- “Long-term monitoring.”
- “River protected for future generations.”

**Acknowledgement of history, treaty rights, and indigenous relationships to the river.**

- “Respect treaty rights.”
- “Protect wild rice.”
- “Center Indigenous voices.”
- “Honor the river’s history.”
- “Cultural education.”

## 4 FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

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The following themes related to future opportunities for community engagement emerged from the responses of participants and respondents. These suggestions may provide ideas for future engagement efforts.

**Education and Awareness as a Gateway to Engagement** – Many people lack knowledge of the river, estuary, access points, current health of both the river and resources and want to learn more about the ecology of the river. There is a desire for clear, simple, and hopeful information. Education is tied to trust and safety.

**Suggested opportunities include:**

- Estuary 101 programming (short talks, signage, digital info)
- Campus and school-based education (UWS, Stowe School, community centers)
- Positive messaging that balances progress without erasing history

**Lowering Barriers to Access** – People want to engage but face transportation, cost, accessibility, or confidence barriers).

**Suggested opportunities include:**

- Transportation partnerships (shuttles, campus trips, guided outings)
- Small amenities (benches, fire rings, picnic areas)
- ADA-focused access planning
- Non-fishing, non-expert entry points for engagement (walking, art, observation, foraging)

**Small-Scale, Neighborhood-Based Connections** – Big events and opportunities aren't required – small, local spaces can activate stewardship and belonging.

**Suggested opportunities include:**

- Micro-grants for neighborhood-led river projects
- Parks & Rec convening community clubs
- Revitalization of pocket parks and community gardens
- Block level stewardship events

**Youth and Next-Generation Engagement** – Participation tends to skew older; youth and families want flexible, meaningful, low-stakes ways to engage.

**Suggested opportunities include:**

- Short-term, clearly scoped volunteer roles
- College partnerships and student clubs
- Family-friendly and child-welcoming events
- Work with schools and youth groups -youth led projects, curriculum tie-ins
- Leadership ladders (junior boards, trail ambassadors)

**Storytelling, Memory, and Emotional Connection** – Personal stories are the strongest driver of care, identity, and long-term stewardship.

**Suggested opportunities include:**

- Story collection and sharing (oral histories, exhibits, podcasts)
- Intergenerational events (paddles, walks, art)
- Normalize emotional and cultural connections, not just recreation

**Hand's On Stewardship** – Recreation is a gateway to stewardship, but needs intentional framing. Opportunities for hands on restoration create personally invested care and concern for the resource.

**Suggested opportunities include:**

- Stewardship messaging at access points
- Trail and water ambassadors
- Recreation + service hybrid events
- Clear norms around compatible use
- Restoration days, cleanups, community monitoring programs, adopt-a-site efforts

**Belonging, Inclusion, and Trust-Building** – Engagement and connection grows when people feel welcomed, seen, and invited – especially those historically left out.

**Suggested opportunities include:**

- Food, art, childcare, and transportation bundled with events
- Personal invitations over mass outreach
- Community-led spaces and leadership
- Normalize small attendance as success
- Guided paddles, intro hikes, bird walks, “first time on the river” events, rentals

**Post Restoration and AOC Transition Engagement** – Engage the community in understanding what comes after restoration milestones.

**Suggested opportunities include:**

- Public news and information
- Community monitoring
- Stewardship councils
- “what’s next” forums

## REFERENCES

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