



PROMENADE PARK

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA, UNITED STATES

Winner: 2021 ULI Americas Awards for Excellence, Urban Open Space Category



Spanning the St. Marys River along its north and south banks, Promenade Park has become a symbol of community and rebirth for downtown Fort Wayne, Indiana. Expanding access to the riverfront for visitors and residents alike, the park sparked new downtown businesses and jobs for residents. Due in part to extensive community input, Promenade Park has created a sense of belonging and a place where neighbors can come together.

Owner/developer: Fort Wayne Parks and Recreation

Designers: Design Collaborative, Hoch Associates PC, American Structurepoint, Engineering Resources Inc., One Lucky Guitar, Lamar Johnson Collaborative

Construction manager: The Hagerman Group

Size: 4.5 acres (1.8 ha)

Cover image: (MJames Photography)



One of the most distinctive and frequently used features of the park is its Tree Canopy Trail, winding in and out of the trees lining the river. The trail was specially designed for wheelchair accessibility. *(MJames Photography)*

Park Overview

Promenade Park transformed the north and south banks of the St. Marys River by creating a signature space for recreation, relaxation, and reflection.

In the early 20th century, Fort Wayne’s three rivers—the St. Marys River, the St. Joseph River, and the Maumee River—were important community assets that powered mills and provided transportation before flooding led the community to “wall off” the rivers with levees during the 1980s.

In 2011, Mayor Tom Henry made riverfront development a priority. To shape and guide this development, the Riverfront Fort Wayne initiative was created with strong support from the mayor and city council.

After a comprehensive study of the city’s rivers, the 4.5-acre (1.8 ha) future site of Promenade Park was identified for the first phases of riverfront development. Opened in 2019, the creation of the park was a significant turning point in forging a connection between Fort Wayne’s urban center and the riverfront.

Through its design, the park encourages connections with nature and people. From large bench swings to curved hillside seating that fosters conversations, Promenade Park offers a mental break for downtown workers and residents alike in a natural environment.

The park is connected to the city’s Rivergreenway, which comprises 25 miles (40 km) of riverside paths, serving walkers, bikers, and hikers. Before the park’s existence, there were few access points to the river and they were difficult to reach, but now they are the cornerstone of the community.

Additional amenities—such as canoes and kayaks, boat tours, an accessible playground, a splash pad, ping-pong tables, a band shell for performances, an amphitheater, and a 6,400-square-foot (595 sq m) pavilion—ensure that there is something for each of the 50,000 annual visitors to enjoy.

Social Equity and Community Engagement

The location of Fort Wayne, at the confluence of three rivers, was important to the establishment of the city in the late 1700s. During the 20th century, however, new development had largely turned its back on the rivers rather than celebrating them, and overgrown vegetation prevented many residents from regularly seeing and accessing the waterfront. Promenade Park was an opportunity to reconnect people and downtown amenities to—and across—the rivers.

To ensure community engagement from the very beginning, the city of Fort Wayne worked closely with the Riverworks Design Group, a partnership of designers, architects, engineers, and storytellers committed to making Promenade Park a world-class destination that was formed exclusively to execute the planning and design for the park.

Over five years' time, the Riverworks Design Group held numerous public meetings with residents and community organizations to ensure that the park was developed to reflect the history and culture of the city. Using a mix of engagement strategies, including focus groups, surveys, and boat tours along the river, over 8,000 community members contributed their thoughts and ideas.

A primary consideration for Promenade Park was that everyone in the community could use the space freely and easily. The Turnstone Center, a community stakeholder that provides programs to empower people with disabilities, helped organize focus groups with blind athletes and people with sensory disorders and Parkinson's disease. Input from these focus groups informed many design decisions.



Seating was built into the grassy hillside leading down to the waterfront. With sloped pathways and staircases, seating and the waterfront were made accessible to those with varying abilities. (MJames Photography)

The park was designed for maximal physical accessibility, including gradual sloping walking paths with five-foot (1.5 m) turn radii to accommodate wheelchairs, floating docks to facilitate getting in and out of kayaks and canoes, multiple family restrooms, accessible play features, and wheelchair seating at tables.

The comfort of visitors was another factor, with a significant tree canopy and built structures providing an abundance of shade. All the park's amenities, aside from the pavilion and band shell rentals, are free to the community, allowing equitable access to Promenade Park for all of Fort Wayne's residents and visitors.

Resilience and Sustainability

Prior to its development, Promenade Park consisted of empty concrete blocks near the waterfront. The businesses and neighborhoods surrounding the park were highly susceptible to flooding. Because of this, great care was taken in the design to allow the park to hold floodwater safely, helping lessen flooding effects in the community.

The construction of the park was carefully executed in order not to disrupt the existing environment, which in part consisted of the strategic placement of local, native plants to not interfere with existing vegetation. Supports for the Tree Canopy Trail, a nearly 600-foot-long (183 m) canopy walk through the trees, were placed to keep wetlands intact and weave the trail around the trees—any trees removed for the trail were replaced at a higher ratio. New connections created between the city and the riverfront have encouraged the community to care for Promenade Park through the cleanup of the riverbanks and rivers.

Funding

The creation of Promenade Park was made possible through collaboration among public agencies, private organizations, and the community. Construction costs for the park totaled roughly \$20 million. The Regional Development Authority (RDA), formed in 2016 by the 11 counties that make up northeast Indiana, contributed \$5.17 million; private donations totaled \$5.3 million; and Legacy funds, from the sale of the city's electric utility assets, totaled \$10 million. Legacy funds also contributed \$6 million for land acquisition, permitting, environmental remediation, and park design. Fees from private vendors operating out of the park—including Fort Wayne Outfitters, Trubble Riverside Café, and the Sweet Breeze canal boat—contribute to funding for operations and maintenance.

In response to the success of Promenade Park as a waterfront gathering space for large and diverse crowds, the city is planning for future phases of Riverfront Fort Wayne, including new recreation areas, trails, and mixed-use developments along the river on both sides of the park.