

EAST RIVERFRONT

ASSETS STUDY

Engagement Summary

Round 1: April, 2021

Part of the

PARKS & REC
STRATEGIC PLAN



Round 1 Engagement

Along with the City of Detroit Parks & Recreation Department, the consultant team hosted five virtual public meetings in April 2021, each focused on different areas of the East Riverfront.

JEFFERSON VILLAGE

April 13, 6:00 – 7:30 p.m

GOLD COAST

OWEN PARK, ERMA
HENDERSON MARINA & PARK

April 7, 6:00 – 7:30 pm

MARINA DISTRICT

RIVERSIDE MARINA & ST. JEAN BOAT LAUNCH

April 14, 6:00 – 7:30 p.m

THE ARETHA

April 15, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m

CIVIC CENTER

HART PLAZA, SPIRIT PLAZA,
JOE LOUIS FIST

April 21, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m

Detroit River

Participation

In all, about 70 stakeholders joined across all meetings.



Format

Due to the pandemic, meetings were held virtually on Zoom. Short introductory presentations were followed by group discussion, where comments were recorded live on virtual sticky notes (shown below). Presentation materials along with recordings of the meetings can be found on our website [here](#).

What are your three favorite sites along the riverfront? Of the sites in this study, which ones have you visited?

THE EAST RIVERFRONT

JEFFERSON VILLAGE

MARINA DISTRICT
UNIVERSITY MARINA, ST. CLAIR BOAT CLUB

GOLD COAST
OWEN PARK, ERMA HENDERSON MARINA & PARK

GABRIEL RICHARD PARK

MT. ELLIOT PARK

ROBERT C. VALADE PARK

THE ARETHA

MILLIKEN STATE PARK AND HARBOR

MILLIKEN STATE PARK WETLANDS

CULLEN PLAZA (+ CAROUSEL)

RIVERWALK GARDEN ROOMS

GM PLAZA

CIVIC CENTER
HART PLAZA, CHRYSLER PLAZA, BOE LOUIS PRIST

I've spent a good part of my life at the aretha. I also enjoy mt. elliot and the entire riverwalk. I live and walk along the riverwalk many days that I don't cross jefferson (as long as it's not too cold) -Shahida

Lived here 60 years. I spent a lot of time coming to the aretha. doing it for over 25 years, love the riverwalk itself. it's a detroit jewel. some people may take it for granted. these are gems and jewels. i'd like to see them keep flowing and prosperous - Pam Powell

Riverfront is one of my highlights. been going for 63 years. since i was a child. place next to ehene park. great place for a dook. I'd like to explore hat opportunity to place a dook there and naming it after john train. it'd be great to travel down the river, take kids -Rhubon

the transformation is amazing. cullen - million stata. i like the whole route. i belong to a dog walking group. we go to joe lewis arena and oome baek. can't wait til the west riverfront is developed -snoe

i enjoy the riverfront. i love living so close to fresh water. i spent many years going to ehene. it's wonderful to see all the boats can come and dook. see the beautiful lawn and nature. animals. see the entertainment. great health event, healing space. it has such value to our city. brings beauty and healing. i ride my bike all along the riverfront. even some times in the winter. -piper

this concert venue is on international waters. directly look at canada. boats that pull up. awesome experience you can't get anywhere else. detroiters take it for granted. memorials are beautiful here too. -blake

i've just been speaking about this. it's an international border-rubon

born and raised. frequently spend time in the city and particularly on the river - millikan and cullen plaza. spent a lot of my time at the aretha. it's a gem. it's quite essential detroit culture. something we can all be proud of -deirdre

nice park, could use more [restroom] facilities -ruben

use the riverfront to commute to work. enjoyed the new robert valade park. great addition. i've attended the aretha ones. did enjoy it. enjoyed pop ups and festivals at hart plaza-daniel

beautiful venue. proud to work with the aretha. i've bicycled and walked every inch of the walk. hart plaza is my favorite jazz fest! one of the best views in the city -joe miller

concerns about parking. parking structure to make it easier? bus services from eastern market? gridlock too (one way streets?) it's great/fantastic -jw mitchell

arts presenter for the aretha. so excited to work with an independent venue. amazing if we could maintain and support for staying independent. supports local artists. it's an amazing space and important part of the music industry in detroit -jennifer

I work with the aretha and the riverfront. it's generational - families that have enjoyed the aretha. the young to the parents to grandparents enjoying the amenities has been meaningful. the concerts have generations attending and enjoying that. gathering place for families. people feel welcome and enjoy a great time there. -Sharon

Summary of Findings

What Detroiters Think About Their Riverfront

The riverfront should be connected as much as possible

Hard to pick a favorite spot! It's so diverse. My three favorite are different: The Civic Center (energizing space), Milliken Park (beautiful, flora/fauna, quiet) and The Aretha (unique, beautiful)

I lived in Belize for a couple years, I was trying to find something to do when I came home, feeling a real sense of pride when there at Hart Plaza -- the river was so blue, all the people watching. I remember being shocked at the jazz fest, how diverse it was, going stage to stage.

The riverfront represents a rebirth, gives the energy, see another country from the riverfront.

Riverfront investment helps our property values. Can bike down Jefferson to the RiverWalk. It's one of the reasons we selected to live here.

I love living so close to fresh water.

There's lots of land on the riverside, build more restaurant and amenities

I love all the stops along the way. I enjoy the interactions with all the people. It's wonderful thing. Even if the cold out, if the sun's out, I'm going to walk

My memory goes back to ethnic festivals, going with family ... seeing the multi-generations of families

Preserve the variety.

An aerial photograph showing a residential area with a large green park area outlined by a yellow dashed line. The park contains a large circular parking lot with many cars, a white cross-shaped building, and a marina with several boats. A road runs diagonally through the park. The text 'OWEN PARK' is overlaid on the left side of the image, and 'ERMA HENDERSON PARK & MARINA' is overlaid on the bottom right. A 'Google Earth' logo is visible in the bottom left corner.

**OWEN
PARK**

**ERMA
HENDERSON
PARK &
MARINA**

OWEN PARK & ERMA HENDERSON PARK AND MARINA

WHO ATTENDED: Area residents who are walkers, bikers, nature lovers, sports enthusiasts, active and passive users of Erma Henderson Park and Marina; though no boaters. Also some who did not realize that Owen Park was a public space.

WHEN: April 7, 6:00 – 7:30 p.m

“ This park has nowhere to go
but up! ”

- MEETING PARTICIPANT ON OWEN PARK

OWEN PARK:

- Primarily used for fishing
- Improve access: Make it easier to get down to the water and address the car-tracked terrain.
- Add lighting.
- Address the abandoned building next to the park, it would make it seem less isolated and safer.
- Some suggested adding amenities, like benches for seniors, and activities for kids, like fishing.
- Others want the park as a quiet space and fishing spot.

OWEN PARK & ERMA HENDERSON PARK AND MARINA cont'd

WHO ATTENDED: Area residents who are walkers, bikers, nature lovers, sports enthusiasts, active and passive users of Erma Henderson Park and Marina; though no boaters. Also some who did not realize that Owen Park was a public space.

WHEN: April 7, 6:00 – 7:30 p.m

“Important for boating, preserve this recreation experience.”

- MEETING PARTICIPANT ON ERMA HENDERSON

ERMA HENDERSON PARK AND MARINA:

- Flower gardens are a big attraction, and the basketball courts are well used.
- Address the late-night noise: People gathering in the parking lot disturb nearby residents. (Worse during the pandemic.)
- Add amenities: Food, boat and bike rentals and other concessions that both boaters and non-boaters could enjoy.
- Improve access: Both to the marina and between the marina and the park.
- Reopen the bathrooms.

An aerial photograph of a suburban area. A yellow dashed line outlines a rectangular residential development in the upper-middle section of the image. The development consists of several rows of houses on a grid of streets. To the left of the outlined area is a large green field with a winding path. To the right is a mix of residential and commercial buildings, including a large warehouse-like structure. In the foreground, a large body of water (a lake or bayou) is visible, with a marina and several boats. The overall scene is a typical suburban landscape with green spaces and residential housing.

JEFFERSON VILLAGE

JEFFERSON VILLAGE

WHO ATTENDED: Neighborhood residents that want action. They take great pride in their neighborhood.

WHEN: April 13, 6:00 – 7:30 p.m

“Our neighborhood is nice, but the functionality is lacking”

- MEETING PARTICIPANT

- Are knowledgeable about its history, current state and have ideas for addressing vacant lots, discontinuous sidewalks, etc.
- Multiple efforts to connect with the City and DEGC have not yielded the desired results.
- Are frustrated and fear being left out of the decision making/development process.
- See “limitless” opportunities for development: Neighborhood housing, a park and retail.
- Are concerned that building homes of similar size is cost prohibitive and lesser stock will compromise quality and property values.
- Are interested in accessing Riverside Marina as a recreation site.

ST. JEAN BOAT LAUNCH & RIVERFRONT MARINA



Kears
Marina

Fairview

Riverside
Marina

St. Jean

St. Jean Boat Launch

RIVERSIDE MARINA & ST. JEAN BOAT LAUNCH

WHO ATTENDED: Boat owners, non-boaters and marina management.

WHEN: April 14, 6:00 – 7:30 p.m

When I go to the marina, I want to feel like I'm on vacation.

- MEETING PARTICIPANT

› BOATERS:

- Have concerns about admitting non-boaters including waterfront/dock safety, keeping them away from boat slips.
- Offer enhanced opportunities for boaters (who pay slip fees) vs. non-boaters.
- Offer non-boaters limited access memberships.
- Want more places to dock along the riverfront and docking for larger boats
- Want more activities including concerts, food truck competitions.

› NON-BOATERS:

- Want access to the marina.
- Want to add aquatic rentals, gym/sauna and other recreational facilities.

› Reestablish the Belle Isle water taxi.

› Create opportunities to encourage women anglers.

› At St. Jean: Issue with unauthorized jet ski rentals needs attention.

THE ARETHA FRANKLIN AMPHITHEATER



THE ARETHA

WHO ATTENDED: Enthusiastic, long-time concert goers, facility management staff and their supporters.

WHEN: April 15, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m

“*It's second to none, I've travelled all over the world*”

- MEETING PARTICIPANT

- Had a great affection for and memories of facility.
- Mentioned that generations have enjoyed events there.
- Consider it a vital part of Detroit's arts and culture legacy.
- Provides jobs to the community, especially young people.
- Improve access: Continue the RiverWalk in front of the building and improve the pavement and aesthetics of the Atwater St. detour
- Improve the parking: More open lots, shuttle availability from off-site locations (Eastern Market, etc.)
- Improve the “back of the house”: Improve the locker rooms, the stage floor and canopy, winterize the bathrooms (capital improvements)
- Improve the “front of the house”: Update the box office, add LED screens, better seats, more concessions, and enhanced security.
- Add winter activities: Ice skating on the lagoon and a sledding hill.
- Form a “Friends of The Aretha” group of volunteers.

THE CIVIC CENTER

SPIRIT PLAZA

THE FIST

HART PLAZA

THE CIVIC CENTER

WHO ATTENDED: Detroiters and regional Hart Plaza/Civic Center fans and event promoters who love the facility, but see its shortcomings.

WHEN: April 21, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m

It's a recognizable center of Detroit culture and part of our brand

- MEETING PARTICIPANT

MONUMENT TO JOE LOUIS:

- Mostly did not want the sculpture moved.
- Strongly recommended access improvements across Jefferson.
- Said that closing Woodward at Spirit Plaza has helped improve access.
- Wanted better maintenance of the area, added greenery and benches.

SPIRIT PLAZA

- Like the events but suggest better marketing to get the word out.
- Event promoters: Insurance and security are issues when holding events at Hart Plaza. Challenging as a program space.
- Noise factor: Entertainment is in conflict with courts and other CAY business.
- Most walk or bike there, drivers park in underground garage

THE CIVIC CENTER cont'd

WHO ATTENDED: Detroiters and regional Hart Plaza/Civic Center fans and event promoters who love the facility, but see its shortcomings.

WHEN: April 21, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m

“ It’s Detroit at its loveliest. It really is. ”

- MEETING PARTICIPANT

HART PLAZA

Accessing the site: Via car, walking, biking, QLine.

- Boaters listen from the water but have no docking access.

Parking: Ford Auditorium garage, Milliken Park (and walk to the site)

- More parking is needed for people working the events.

Event facilitation and management: Facility requirements for events have changed radically since 1975. More heavy equipment, technology needs, etc.

- Future events may need to be gated for crowd control, vaccine checks and enhanced security.
- How to close off events yet maintain RiverWalk accessibility.
- Smaller events cannot meet insurance and security requirements.
- Create smaller spaces for neighborhood events on the lower level.
- Major capital improvements needed to the upper and lower levels.

More improvements: Improve the walking surface, pavers are degraded and unsafe.

- Turn the fountain back on!
- Better maintain the green spaces.
- Position the monuments in a “more intentional” way.
- Add seating and grills.
- Show movies and bring back the festivals.
- Work with MDOT to improve Jefferson access issues.



THE BIG TAKEAWAYS

- **Detroiters *love* their waterfront;** want it to thrive and see many ways to improve/expand it.
- The **focus groups were positive events with enthusiasm and appreciation** expressed for all sites. Discussions were robust, respectful and on-point.
- **Participants were realistic about the shortcomings of most sites** and vocal in offering recommendations for improvement.
- **The most analytical, in-depth discussions were around Hart Plaza and Jefferson Village.** Individuals with specialized knowledge of these sites attended (community leaders and a developer at Jefferson Village, event promoters at Hart Plaza). Both substantive concerns about, and ideas for change at these sites were expressed.
- **Jefferson Village residents are in need of meaningful engagement** and action from the City and DEGC in the near-term. Trust issues, frustration and being ignored were expressed.
- **Both Hart Plaza and the Aretha require substantive capital improvements** that require extensive funding. Both professional and non-professional participants agreed that modernization and a long list of front and back of the house improvements are essential.
- **The parks have potential to provide educational opportunities/activities.** Identify them and seek funding partners to activate.



THE BIG TAKEAWAYS

- **People want more access to the water:** Docking sites at facilities along the riverfront (Hart Plaza, The Aretha, others), the addition of more places to access and patronize from the water including restaurants, entertainment and retail options.
- **Security-related issues are becoming more complex** and substantive for major events at the Civic Center, and likely The Aretha, too, though that was not specifically mentioned. For example, vaccine checks may be needed once large events begin again.
- **The marinas appear to be the underutilized properties** with boaters and non-boaters recommending entertainment options, expanded facilities, aquatic rentals, access for non-boating area residents and docks for bigger boats.
- **A wide range of access issues were identified at the various sites:** Accessing The Aretha from the Riverwalk vs. detouring to the roadway; pedestrian and vehicular flow at the Civic Center and The Aretha; access to the water in Owen Park, etc.
- **Parking options were identified as a major obstacle for The Aretha**, though less so for the Civic Center.
- It's amazing how **many Detroiters still don't know about the Riverfront**

Next Steps

ROUND 1: ONGOING ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholders: Boaters at Riverside Marina

Activity: On-site interviews at the marinas OR create a short survey, get the lists and send to boaters. (Since the City owns these sites can't they compel the list of users.)

Stakeholders: Fishermen/women at Owen Park

Activity: On-site interviews

Stakeholders: The Aretha patrons

Activity: Second focus group, invitation only

Stakeholders: Business community

Activity: Partnering with Chip Rhode from Rivertown Detroit Association, one-one one outreach

Stakeholders: Seniors at The Whittier

Activity: Deliver survey to site

Stakeholders: Detroit and regional residents

Activity: Survey with online access and paper copy distribution plus site sign placement and other outreach to generate responses

Stakeholders: RiverWalk users

Activity: If possible, partner with DRFC and the Outdoor Adventure Center to capture survey feedback