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New Plan Lays Out 10-Year Vision for Access and Recreation on the Three Rivers

Three Rivers Water Trail to Increase Impact as Economic Driver, Recreational Asset for Region

Pittsburgh, PA – Friends of the Riverfront, with support from the Port of Pittsburgh Commission (Port of Pitt), Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PA Fish and Boat), and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC), has released a comprehensive management plan for the Three Rivers Water Trail System.

The Three Rivers Water Trail Management Plan positions Pittsburgh as a premier destination for outdoor recreation. By improving the infrastructure around non-motorized boating activities like kayaking and paddleboarding, the plan is set to boost tourism and support the local outdoor economy.

The plan also received funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).

The Three Rivers Water Trail is currently a system of more than 30 non-motorized boat launches and river access points built and operated by Friends of the Riverfront on the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio Rivers. Since 1991, Friends of the Riverfront has worked to develop, manage and expand the 35+ mile Three Rivers Heritage Trail and the Three Rivers Water Trail.

The Water Trail Management Plan is a crucial part of Friends of the Riverfront's mission to connect people to the region's riverfronts through access, conservation, and recreation. As the region experiences growing interest in outdoor activities, this plan provides a clear roadmap for the future of river-based recreation in Allegheny County.

The plan also emphasizes environmental stewardship, ensuring that river access and use remain sustainable for generations to come.

The initiative is supported by key partners, including the **Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources**, the **Pennsylvania Department of Economic Development**, as well as numerous local stakeholders, including state, Allegheny County and non-profit partners.

Studies show that trails drive economic growth, provide better health and environmental outcomes, and improve quality of life. Friends of the Riverfront's 2024 Three Rivers Heritage Trail Impact Report showed that

the Heritage Trail – the land trail – drove \$26.5 million in economic impact in 2023 through local spending and effects of increased development.

Intensive industry along the three rivers has historically restricted public access, resulting in the disconnect of communities from our riverfronts. Over the last few decades, investment into the health of the rivers has improved water quality and resulted in a higher demand for public access to this resource.

In 2020, outdoor recreation contributed \$12 billion to the state’s economy, supporting the equivalent of 150,000 jobs, or 1.5 percent of our commonwealth’s total economic productivity.

The Management Plan was shaped by extensive public outreach, including user surveys, stakeholder interviews, and community meetings. The plan will be publicly available and is intended for use by local governments, state agencies and other nonprofit organizations. The Management Plan focuses on four strategic pillars:

- **Accessibility:** The plan identifies key areas for improved and equitable access to water recreation, aiming to remove barriers and promote inclusivity for all residents and visitors.
- **Conditions & Maintenance:** Outlined standards for maintaining water access points will ensure safe, high-quality experiences for paddlers, anglers, and nature enthusiasts.
- **Expansion:** The plan proposes new water access points across underserved areas while enhancing current sites to meet the growing demand for non-motorized watercraft activities.
- **Promotion:** A targeted promotional strategy aims to elevate the Water Trail’s profile as a recreational and cultural asset, both locally and nationally.

“This management plan is a transformative step toward making Pittsburgh’s rivers more accessible and enjoyable for everyone. Our rivers are integral to the identity of Pittsburgh, and this plan ensures they will be available for future generations to explore and cherish,” said Kelsey Ripper, Executive Director of Friends of the Riverfront.

“This plan is not just about access points; it’s about reconnecting people with the rivers that shaped our region’s history and will drive our future. This plan creates new opportunities for outdoor recreation, environmental stewardship, and community engagement while celebrating Pittsburgh’s rich river heritage,” Ripper added.

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission Executive Director Tim Schaeffer lauded the management plan as an important initiative.

“Friends of the Riverfront is a trusted and recognized partner in establishing deliberate and strategic access to Pennsylvania’s flowing waters,” he said.

“This plan, particularly its emphasis on accessibility, offers both a blueprint for the Three Rivers and a model for thoughtful, collaborative, and result-oriented connections to waterways all across the Commonwealth,” added Schaeffer.

Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn said that the plan was crucial to growing the region’s recreation economy.

“Expanding access to nature is critical to DCNR’s mission to conserve and sustain Pennsylvania’s natural resources for present and future generations’ use and enjoyment, and we are proud to support Friends of the Riverfront’s initiative to expand access to the Three Rivers Water Trail,” Dunn said. “I am hopeful that this plan will lead in an era of improved health and wellness along the water trail, as well as new opportunities to bolster the outdoor recreation economy in the region.”

About Friends of the Riverfront: Since 1991, Friends has worked to protect and restore the riverfront in the Pittsburgh region through trail development and stewardship after decades of legacy pollution. The Three Rivers Heritage Trail now encompasses 35 miles of urban and suburban riverfront trails along both banks of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers. Through broad and diverse collaborations, we continue to work towards and promote environmental restoration, economic vitality, and public health benefits for Allegheny County and Southwestern Pennsylvania.

[ACCESS THE THREE RIVERS WATER TRAIL MANAGEMENT PLAN](#)

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