

Rivers of Opportunity

25 Small and Mid-Size Illinois Cities Adeptly Leveraging Waterways to Enhance Ecosystems & Community Life



Chaddick Institute Policy Study | October 31, 2024
By Joseph P. Schwieterman and Emily Hamilton

Illinois's 81,110 miles of rivers and streams reach nearly all its cities with more than a few thousand residents, but the work of smaller municipalities to leverage these natural resources is poorly understood. While the high-profile river initiatives of Chicago, Naperville, Peoria, and other cities have captured the spotlight, laudable efforts by less populated places tend to go unrecognized outside their home areas.

This report showcases 25 small and mid-size communities in Illinois that lie outside of metropolitan Chicago and are notable for having thoughtful civic, environmental, and recreational initiatives pertaining to rivers. These villages and cities, all having populations under 20,000, are a subset of the more than 100 municipalities evaluated. Each has made rivers dynamic parts of their community without the help of expansive planning staffs or public works budgets.

The Featured Communities are grouped by size, with smaller communities presented first. To keep the focus on village and city initiatives, we exclude the work of multijurisdictional efforts of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the State of Illinois, county governments, and public units devoted to watershed protection from our discussion. We also excluded industrial, port, and marine shipping initiatives. Our study team made fact-finding visits to all except two communities, where visits will occur in 2025.

Our summaries of the 25 communities are followed by conclusions and a review of Corn Belt Ports' work facilitating economic development in ways not covered in our review. Starting on page 17, we summarize the communities' characteristics and tabulate their river strategies, as well as describe our evaluation techniques. A photo gallery is on page 20.



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Photo (above), Chaddick Institute site visit to Oglesby, IL, March 2023



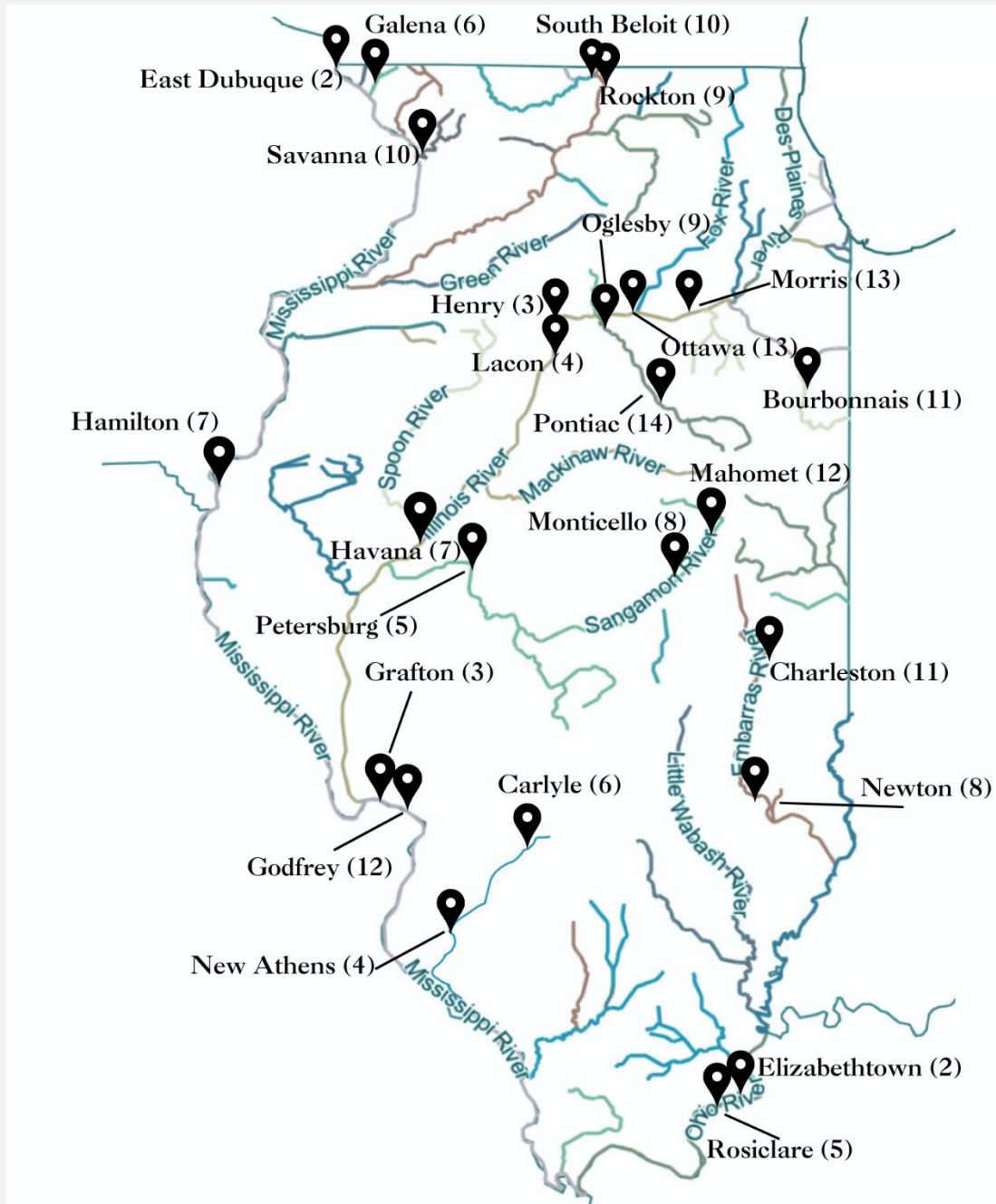
**JOSEPH
SCHWIETERMAN,
PH.D.**



**EMILY
HAMILTON**

WILLIAM KLING, JD, Project Director

Figure 1: Featured Communities, with Page Numbers

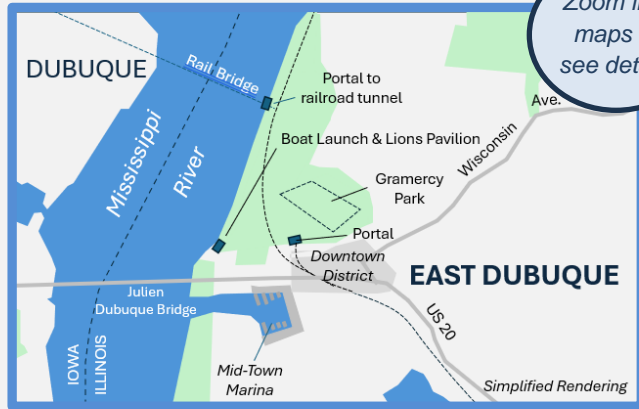


**The National Great Rivers
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We are grateful for the support of the National Great Rivers Research & Education Center, which is dedicated to studying great river systems and the communities that use them. The center aspires to be a leader in scholarly research, education, and outreach related to the interconnectedness of large rivers, their floodplains, watersheds, and their associated communities.

SMALL COMMUNITIES, POP. < 2,500

City of East Dubuque (1,485)

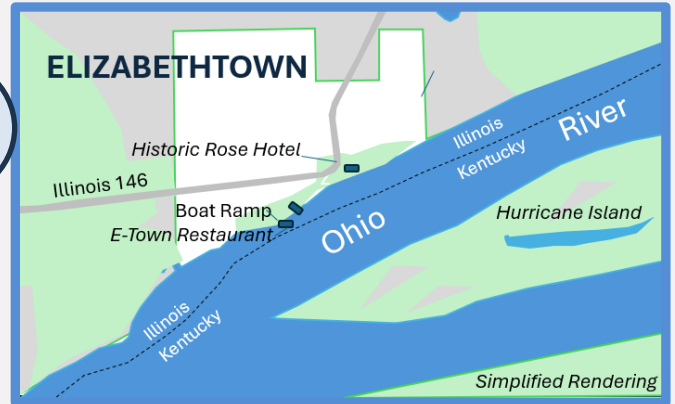


This small community in the state’s northwest corner is noted for Gramercy Park, a 10-acre amenity atop Montgomery Hill that offers striking river views. The park is an Illinois Natural Heritage Landmark near 26 ceremonial and burial mounds from the Hopewell Native American Culture. The municipal park has an overlook (*see photo*), a pavilion seating approximately 40 people, walking trails, playgrounds, modern restrooms, and picnic sites with charcoal grills. Its trails have historical and archaeological signage.

East Dubuque assists the privately managed Midtown Marina, which has 253 slips, a 34-site campground, and a restaurant. The Lions Club erected a pavilion near the city’s boat launch, offering views of the 5,700-foot Julien Dubuque Bridge, which links the city to the much larger Dubuque, IA. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. Nearby, the Dubuque Rail Bridge, built in 1888 with a swing span, is iconic and unusual for being reachable by trains in a tunnel through Montgomery Hill. East Dubuque seeks to overcome funding limits that prevent it from hosting broader river-oriented civic and cultural events.

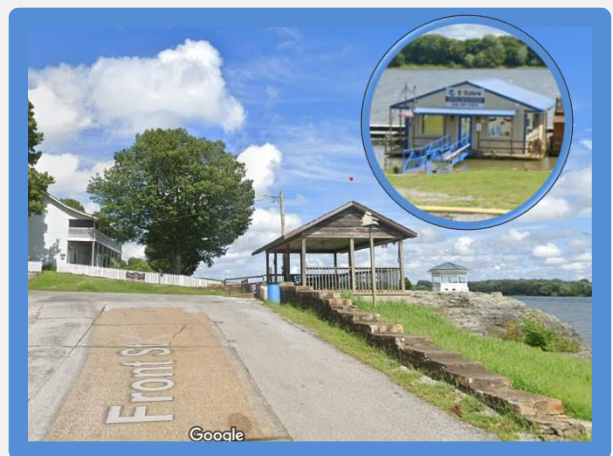


Village of Elizabethtown (219)



This tiny Ohio River town has three municipally owned parcels along its shoreline. Though unnamed, the most prominent parcel has a pavilion and boat ramp and serves as the River to River Trail trailhead. This 160-mile trail is overseen by the River to River Trail Society based in nearby Metropolis. Elizabethtown’s Historic Rose Hotel, which is state-owned and dates to 1812, is Illinois’s oldest hotel (*visible in the photo, far left*), and it overlooks the river. Another parcel provides access to a docked vessel, *E-Town River*, which has a restaurant (temporarily closed, *inset photo*), while a third parcel is currently unleased.

Several blocks from the river, a small municipal park is used for festivals and recreation. Elizabethtown has the smallest population and lowest median household income of the 25 featured communities. More funding would create opportunities for larger-scale programming and riverfront development. Discussions are underway about hosting a car show on the riverfront.



City of Grafton (765)



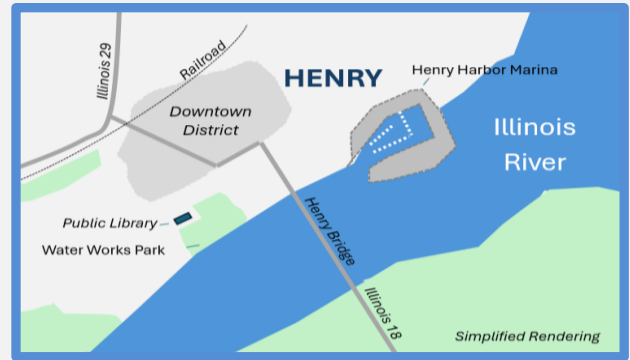
Grafton, said to have been “born on the river,” has a veritable cavalcade of Mississippi River connections. It has a historic lighthouse (not in use), boat launch, marina, and dining district within an easy walk from the shoreline. The privately run Grafton Ferry shuttles people and vehicles across the river. The municipality has a floating harbor with 304 boat slips, many under protective cover. It is an embarkation point for riverboat cruises and bald eagle watching and a popular stop on the Great Loop boating journey.

The city is also notable for the absence of a levee, which is a rarity along this part of the river. Although this exposes it to flooding, it allows for abundant river access. The Lighthouse Park, used for local festivals, has unique concrete municipal sculptures, including the well-known Turtle, Frog & Two Catfish installation. It attracts many visitors on weekends, who enjoy the riverfront and local shops.

The perils of flooding persist. A devastating flood in 2019 prompted a federal agency to buy out many properties and take other flood-mitigation measures. Grafton is undertaking a 10-year tree study to enhance the natural landscape and create artificial eagle roosts. With its shoreline options limited, it has made natural approaches a priority. An effort is underway to expand ferry service beyond weekends and holidays.



City of Henry (2,312)



This Illinois River community has made Water Works Park its most prominent public amenity. The park’s trails, scenic views, and playground equipment make it a popular lunch destination. This restroom-equipped park (*see photo*) draws large crowds for Henry’s 4th of July celebration. It is the start of many canoe trips to Lacon, several miles upriver. The park is also used for fishing derbies hosted by private organizations.

The municipality leases land for the privately managed Henry Harbor Marina, which has invested heavily in improvements and has 800 feet of dock with 70 slips. The marina (*inset photo*) comes to life by serving many boaters on the Great Loop journey, who use its docks, water hookups and fuel. The Henry Public Library, overlooking the river, hosts Bald Eagle Day in winter to foster environmental appreciation.

Plans are underway to revitalize the park, secure state grants to expand it, and boost the number of community events. The historic Henry Bridge, built in 1935 and part of Illinois Route 18, is slated to be replaced by a more conventional concrete span, which evokes concern among residents due to the Depression-era bridge’s aesthetic appeal.



City of Lacon (1,859)

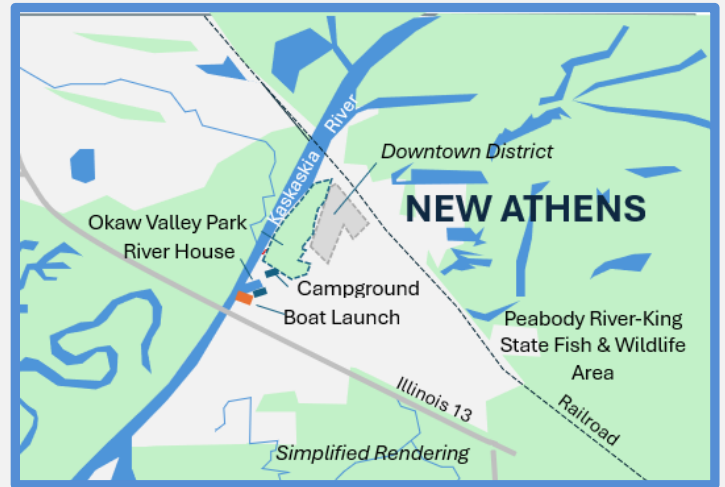


This small community on the Illinois River has made Weber Park a recreational and civic hub. The municipal park, with a boat ramp, boat slips for rental, and a pavilion flanked by two popular restaurants is used for picnics and events. Lacon's Old Settlers Festival is held each August and is known for its music, games, entertainment, parade, and fireworks over the river. The festival recently relocated from the town center to the riverfront park.

The municipal government has provided funds to help a local community center build a binocular stand for birdwatching. The stand is expected to be completed by late 2024. The Lacon Bridge, built in 1939 and part of State Route 17 (*see photo*), is a prominent river landmark connecting this city to Sparland. Lacon's busy Cargill grain elevator is along the river, north of the bridge.



Village of New Athens (1,873)

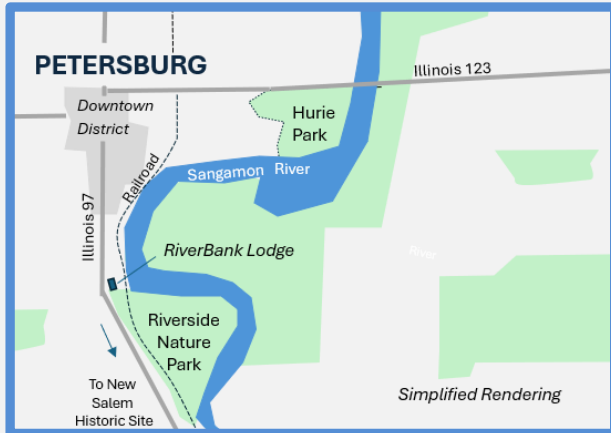


Civic energy flows from Okaw Valley Park in this Kaskaskia River community, which, despite being separated from the river by a levee, is a popular gathering spot. The New Athens Fall Festival, held with the support of a local Methodist church, and local kickball tournaments are among the most popular park events. The park (*see photo*) has baseball and softball diamonds, a playground, and a pavilion. The village is installing a concrete floor in its park pavilion for weddings and other events.

In 2023, New Athens' Kaskaskia River Campground & R.V. park reopened, providing 38 full hook-up sites (with electricity) over 10 acres. This area also hosts the village's Kaskaskia River Festival during summer. As a member of Tree City USA, the town plants trees annually in its campground and park. Sportsmen use a village-run boat launch adjacent to the campground, with ample parking for boat trailers. The launch is a popular jump-off point during spring and summer. Many river users also make stops at the city's well-known downtown restaurants.



City of Petersburg (2,197)

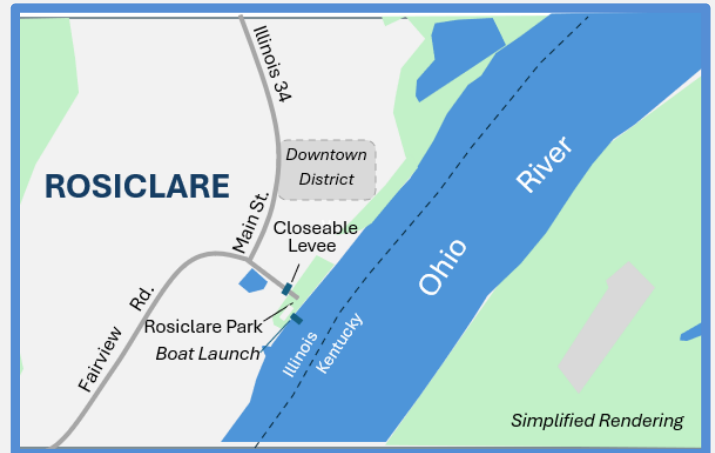


Petersburg’s historic downtown, just a block from the Sangamon River, and its Victorian homes overlooking the waterway exemplify its longstanding cultural connection to water. Many visitors stop here on trips to Lincoln’s New Salem State Historic Site, a reconstructed village two miles upriver where Abraham Lincoln spent his early adulthood. The private Riverbank Lodge offers lodging with river views, while the municipality’s Hurie Park hugs the river’s north bank and has several athletic fields.

Riverside Nature Park (*see photo*), south of downtown and within city limits, is a county-managed preserve known for its walking trails. The city government works with Menard County to support this densely wooded park. Although the river is too shallow for larger boats, Petersburg is the northern terminus of the Lincoln Heritage Canoe Trail, a water route from Decatur. It is also the expected endpoint of the Lincoln Heritage Water Trail, a riverfront path slated to eventually stretch 85 miles and showcase the area’s environmental heritage. However, this city of just 2,197 seeks more resources to promote and improve its river amenities.



City of Rosiclare (955)



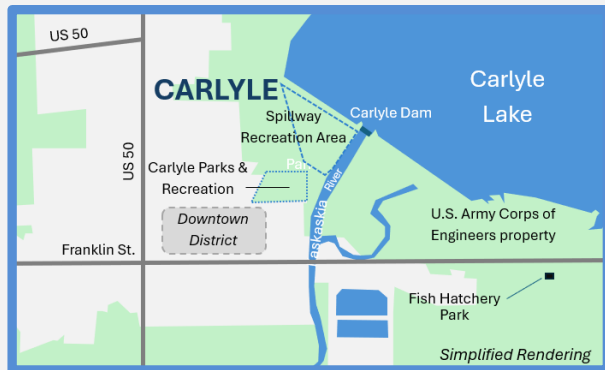
This historic Ohio River town has made “Where the Hills and the River Meet” its official moniker. The small but historic community, which does not even have a traffic light, oversees Rosiclare Park, an expansive shoreline amenity with a riverwalk, scenic views, and a popular small campground. This serene area—Rosiclare’s only park—is managed by the city clerk. The park has three picnic shelters and a gazebo (*see photo*) that can be reserved for reunions, birthday parties, and other events.

Rosiclare Park played a significant role during the solar eclipse in April 2024 when it accepted reservations for eclipse viewing. This riverfront area is also the endpoint of a spur of the Ohio River Scenic Byway. Six miles north, in Shawnee National Forest, an old iron furnace listed on the National Register of Historic Places is a popular tourist stop. The city has a closeable levee that can be left open during regular times and activated when the Ohio’s waters rise.



SMALL CITIES. POP. 2,500 – 9,999

City of Carlyle (3,197)

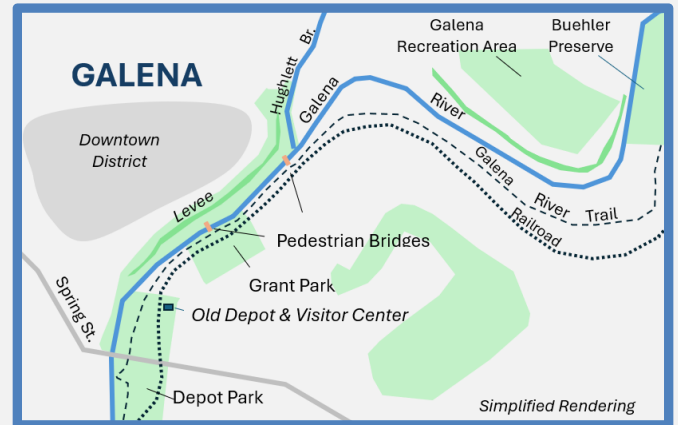


This community on the Kaskaskia River celebrates its connections to Lake Carlyle in unusually creative ways despite having little municipally owned land with waterfrontage. The manmade lake was created in 1967 with the completion of the Carlyle Dam, constructed by the US Army Corps. The dam facilitates water management in the region, including flood control, recreation, and wildlife conservation.

Civic groups in Carlyle leverage Army Corps land to maximum advantage, notably Carlyle Spillway Park, alongside the dam. The park is used for many civic and cultural events. These include the Carlyle Lake Triathlon, Haunted Trails during Halloween, and the Fireworks Spectacular Dam Jam. Carlyle's Parks and Recreation department maintains Carlyle City Park, which abuts Army Corps property. The park has pavilions, a disk golf course, and a baseball diamond. The city also maintains Fishery Hatchery Park in an area once home to a facility that restocked the lake.



City of Galena (3,250)

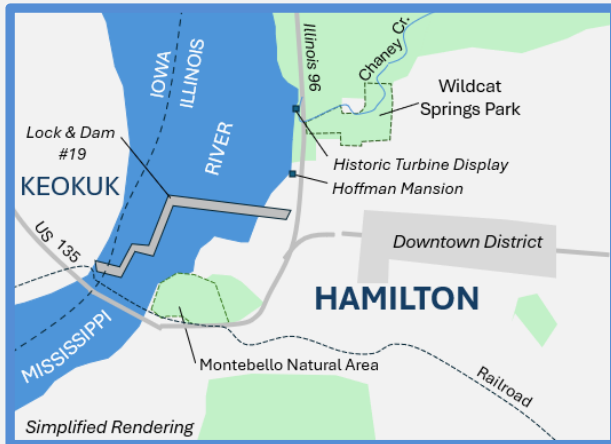


This historic community and popular tourist destination have made the Galena River a focal point of its plans. Grant Park, situated on the east bank and home to a fountain, a historic cannon display, and a gazebo, hosts music performances, weddings, and the annual Country Fair. Nearby Depot Park, named for the preserved railroad station that has become the community's visitor center, also has popular outdoor amenities.

Both parks are situated on the eight-mile Galena River Trail, which is municipally owned and maintained. The trail extends to the confluence of the Galena and Mississippi rivers. Residents and visitors can climb the city's grassy levees for scenic views and cross two pedestrian bridges over the river. Interpretive signs line the riverfront, and "pocket parks" fill gaps between larger parks and have workout equipment and picnic areas. Galena's boat landing is used by both motorized and non-motorized vessels, and its Watershed Protection Plan, overseen by a volunteer committee, works to improve water quality and reduce stormwater runoff.



City of Hamilton (2,689)



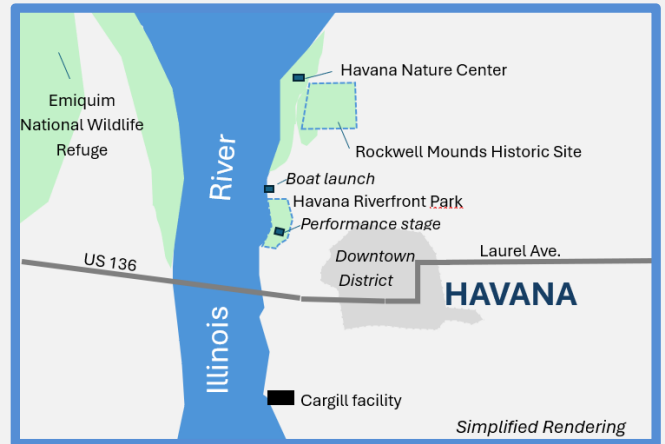
This small city has made Wildcat Spring Park a familiar community gathering spot. Managed by Hamilton Park District and hugging Chaney Creek, a Mississippi River estuary, the park has a boat dock and small campground, all situated near Lock & Dam 19, one of the largest dams on the Mississippi.

Wildcat Springs Park is popular among kayakers and canoeists (although the creek cannot accommodate large boats). This local amenity is used for many community events, including a monthly band show, a fishing derby, Yoga in the Park, and October's "Trunk or Treat." The Park District matches private donations with its funds, installing memorial benches and working with Tree City USA and other groups. In-kind contributions, such as oak trees from a county 4H club, support these efforts.

The City assisted Mississippi River Heritage in relocating one of the dam's massive hydroelectric turbines, built in 1913, to a parking area on Chaney Creek. The turbine (*see photo*) and a commemorative plaque were installed in 2024.



City of Havana (2,827)

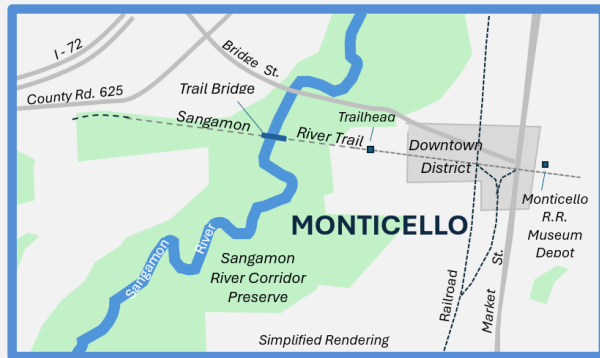


This port along the Illinois River has prioritized expanding access to its once-heavily industrialized waterfront. The municipal government and its independent Havana Park District are focused on Riverfront Park, which has pleasant walkways and a large performance stage for its Riverfront Concert Series. The municipal park is used for a July 4th fireworks show that draws crowds from a considerable distance and is supported by many local sponsors, including the Havana Regional Port District. The town plans to introduce e-bikes to the riverfront to encourage residents and visitors to explore the area.

The Park District operates a twelve-site campground, three boat ramps, and the Havana Nature Center. Campers and other visitors have only a short walk to the Rockwell Indian Mound, a historic landmark with scenic river views. Activity at the port, which includes large Cargill and Archer-Daniels-Midland grain-loading facilities, continues without creating significant conflicts with these recreational uses.



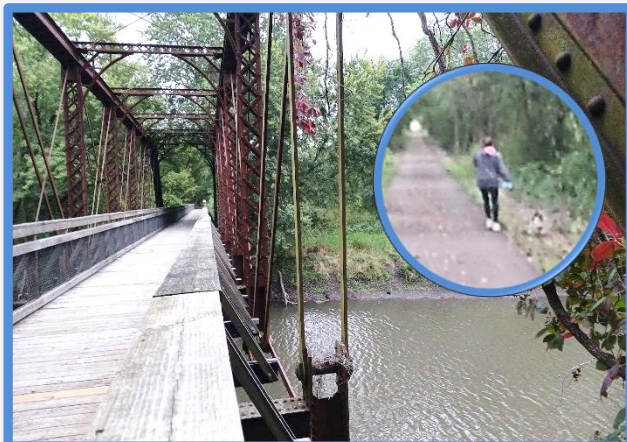
City of Monticello (6,018)



Monticello stands out for supporting the Sangamon River Corridor Reserve, a 108-acre area managed by the nonprofit Land Conservation Foundation in nearby Champaign. The reserve, abutting the city's southwest edge and known for its trails and birdwatching, seeks to preserve and build awareness of the river's ecosystem.

The City of Monticello directly manages the Sangamon River Trail, a 1.2-mile gravel and paved path for recreationists. The trail, made possible through financial support from the City, features the Sangamon River Bridge, a lengthy span over the river. A recent addition is a "Story Walk" program along the trail supported by the local Allerton Public Library and Kirby Hospital. The stories presented change every few weeks. The city also stands out for its ambitious acquisition of riverfront property for preservation.

Monticello's river initiatives are part of a broader effort to maintain the town's high quality of life and attract visitors wanting to experience its scenery and tourist-oriented downtown. The downtown serves as a stop for the Monticello Railroad Museum's trains in summer months.



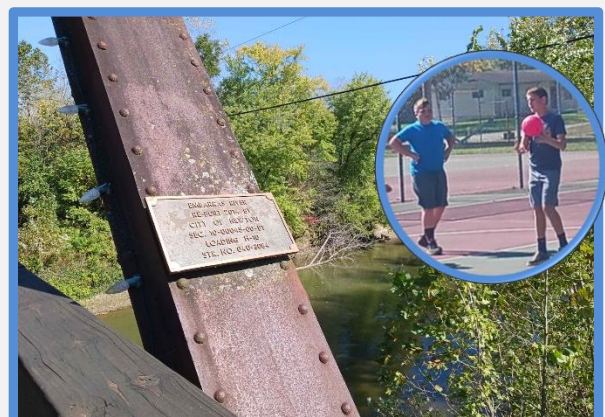
City of Newton (2,685)



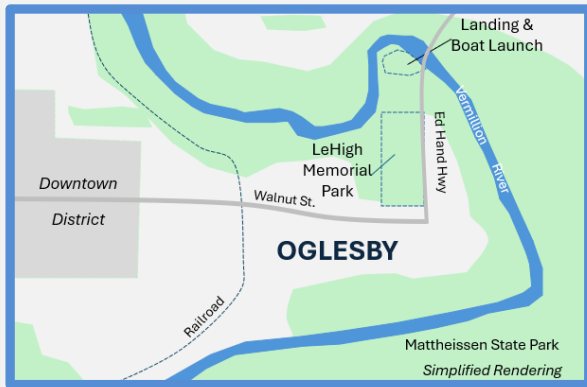
Situated on a bluff overlooking the Embarras River, Newton has directed much of its civic energy toward Peterson Park, which has a playground, mini-golf course, batting cage, and disc golf course. The heavily wooded shoreline park, positioned high above the river, has three pavilions and picnic tables, making it a prominent community gathering spot. Canoeing is an increasingly popular river activity, supported by a paved walking path leading to a small boat launch.

Newton's Old Mill Bridge, built in 1890 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was converted to pedestrian use in 2015 (*see photo*). This lengthy river span, the state's oldest truss bridge, is part of the Eagle Trails system. The community is home to Burl Ives Bridge, which takes State Route 130 across the river and has a plaque honoring the hometown musical hero.

Resource limitations pose challenges for Newton and prevent it from providing boating equipment. Plans for a riverwalk were halted due to aquatic and wildlife preservation concerns. Despite this, Newton's river orientation is growing. Attention has turned to several alternatives, such as creating a trail on an old railbed.



City of Oglesby (3,639)



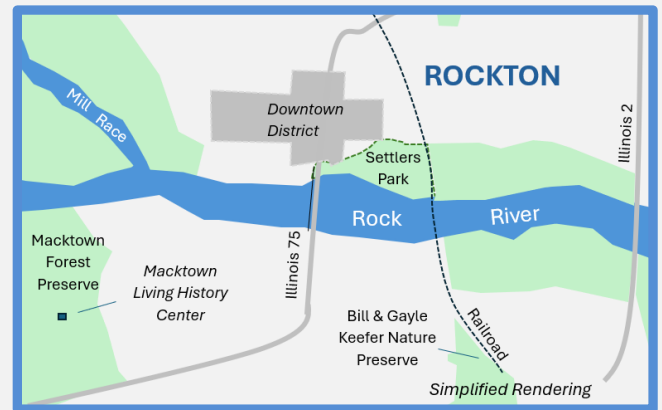
Oglesby, surrounded on three sides by the Vermilion River, has its largest park and a heavily used public landing along the river. LeHigh Park features a large stage and two shelters used during the summer months for family gatherings, reunions, and corporate events. It has a playground, a newly created sand volleyball court, and a disc golf course, which quickly became popular after opening in 2023.

Oglesby's river landing (*see photo*) serves as a drop-off spot for a local river tubing provider and a pick-up spot for canoe and kayak rental providers upstream. The landing features a small parking lot, two small shelters with picnic tables, and a boat launch. A key component of Oglesby's river-focused strategy is to attract more visitors from nearby recreational areas and campgrounds. Starved Rock and Mattheissen State Parks are only a few miles away. Mattheissen is undergoing a state-led expansion.

The city's resources are limited, and a shortage of on-site parking limits LeHigh Park's role. However, visitors are growing due to local amenities and popular downtown restaurants. The city has a long-range plan for the park and is applying for a state grant for a new playground, picnic areas, and a paved walkway to make it more accessible. Additional parking will be addressed in a future phase.



Village of Rockton (7,768)



This Rock River community has made Settlers Park a focal point. This riverside spot comes to life during the Old Settlers Day Festival each summer, welcoming tens of thousands of visitors. The festival was previously held downtown but moved to the river. The park is also used for the weekly River Market, with food vendors, live music, and family entertainment. Rockton Yeti Fest is held for the "abominable snow people of Rockton."

On Rockton's west edge, near the confluence of the Rock and Pecatonica River (*see photo*), is the Macktown Historical Settlement, a cluster of historic buildings managed by the local nonprofit Macktown Living History. Two forest preserves managed by Winnebago County are on the rivers, and the Carl & Myrna Nygren Wetland Preserve spans 721 acres. The preserve has a wildlife overlook and walking trails. It is managed by the Rockford-based Natural Land Institute. The Village also has a boat dock and athletic fields on the river. It is a part of the Rock River Watershed Group, whose focus is on river cleanliness.



City of Savanna (2,712)



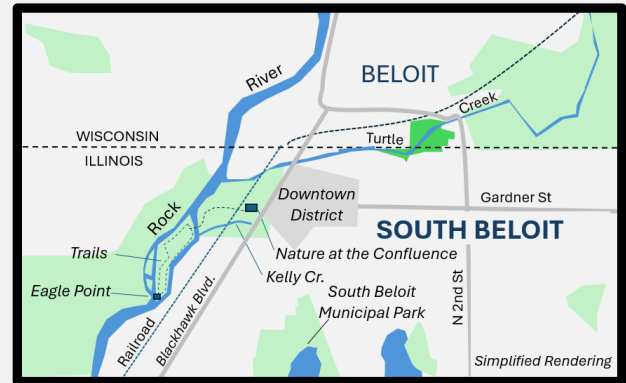
This busy river town and rail junction relies heavily on Marquette Park, a slender one-acre park on the Mississippi River. The municipal park (*see photo*) is used for the community's Shadfly Festival, known for its food and entertainment, and other events. The City has provided support for a traveling river show, which, while independently staged, has helped activate the park. The municipality's Savanna Marina is a hub for boaters and has annual-rental sites for campers.

Savanna's initiatives build on the City's success in securing a 1992 grant, matched locally, to extend the Great River Trail to its downtown. The walking and bicycling trail stretches 62 miles to Rock Island atop a former railbed. A short distance north, the Savanna Veteran Memorial, dedicated in 2021, has a striking river overlook.

The enormous legacy of railroads, however, creates challenges. A busy railroad line separates downtown from the park. The intergovernmental Riverfront Development Board, created by the City and its independent park district in 2023, has expanded Savanna's push to revitalize its riverfront. The body seeks to establish public boat docks, signage, and event spaces along the river to enhance accessibility.



City of South Beloit (7,793)



South Beloit is widely known for Nature at the Confluence, a 90-acre riverfront park where Turtle Creek flows into Rock River. The park is managed by a nonprofit of the same name that works to educate visitors about the significance of the ancestral Ho-Chunk land, where native people lived at Ke-chunk-nee-shun-nuk-ra, or Turtle Village, until 1832.

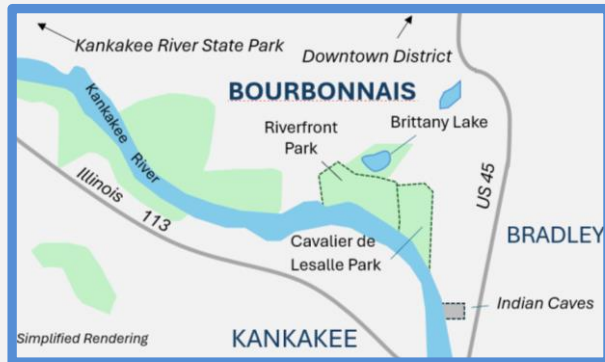
In 2020, Nature at the Confluence opened a visitor center in a retrofitted auto-repair shop (*see photo*) with the support of the South Beloit Public Library, the City, and other community organizations. The park protects the environmentally sensitive area and offers a serene setting for hiking, birdwatching, and environmental education. It has trails, wetlands, and educational programs. A Turtle Island loop featuring the Eagle Point overlook is a popular trail.

South Beloit also has a boat launch, riverside picnic facilities, and fishing spots. The city has invested in flood mitigation measures to protect its riverfront and residential areas, allowing for future development along the water. Less than a mile from the river is the richly landscaped and amenity-filled South Beloit City Park along Lake Victoria,



MID-SIZE CITIES, POP. 10,000 – 19,999

Village of Bourbonnais (18,042)



The Village of Bourbonnais is home to two scenic waterfront parks, including the 12-acre Riverfront Park. This park provides access to the Kankakee River and features rentable pavilions, a disc golf course, trails, and picnic areas. As the largest village park, Riverfront Park showcases natural highlights like rocky ravines, mature trees, and a diverse terrain. Nearby, Cavalier de Lesalle Park sits on a hillside, popular for birdwatching and fishing. Its one-third-mile loop trail is frequently used for summer yoga classes.

Outdoor enthusiasts, including hikers and paddlers, are also drawn to the nearby Indian Caves, a series of narrow caverns located along the Kankakee River's west bank. Just outside the village limits, Davis Creek Campground—set within the expansive 4,000-acre Kankakee River State Park—draws visitors to the area.

As part of the Village's "[Imagine Bourbonnais](#)" initiative, a new master plan is underway to develop Riverfront Park further. A public workshop in January 2024 invited residents to share input to enhance the park's natural features and increase recreational opportunities. A subsequent survey gathered input from 1,149 participants. This planning process continues to generate strong interest as the Village works to provide high-quality open space.



City of Charleston (17,028)



Charleston stands out for its many environmental and recreational initiatives. Lake Charleston is entirely within city limits. It is revered for the municipality's scenic (3.3-mile) Charleston Loop Trail. Several other paths connect the Loop with other attractions, including Sister City, Lakeview, and Woodyard parks. The spillway regulates flow into the Embarras River.

The municipal government oversaw the transition of the area around the spillway from housing to a community-oriented environmental space. The park offers kayak rentals, pavilions for public use, and a playground. It is the site of an annual fishing derby and other events and a gathering spot for birdwatching and hiking groups. It has riverfront pollinator areas and butterfly gardens.

Although private properties account for some river frontage, the City owns and manages Woodyard Memorial Conservation Area, a 205-acre preserve in the wetland-dominated area between the lake and river inhabited by several endangered species. The nearby Warbler River Conservation Area, bisected by the river, is managed by the Grand Prairie Friends, a nonprofit that works closely with the City.



The Village of Godfrey (17,597)



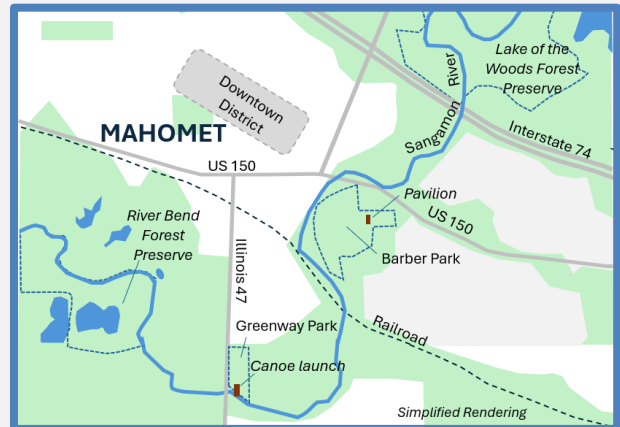
This Mississippi River community manages two riverside parks, the most prominent being Captain Jake Ringering Park at Clifton Terrace. This three-acre park has a playground, a preserved remnant of the prairie, an informative kiosk, and restrooms. It is situated on the Meeting of the Great Rivers Scenic Byway (Illinois Route 100) and is popular for eagle-watching during winter.

The second park, Hoffman Gardens at Great Rivers Park, Godfrey's newest, remains in development. It offers users views of the surrounding bluff's "awe-inspiring rock façade" (see photo). The Nature Institute, a nearby conservation organization, also provides striking river views.

Despite the city's residential neighborhoods and business district being a long way from the river, Godfrey organizes community "clean-up days" to combat invasive honeysuckles on its riverbanks and other environmental challenges. It seeks additional resources to expand community engagement and host river-themed events at its parks.



Village of Mahomet (10,273)



Mahomet has two municipal parks with Sangamon River frontage, the largest of which is Barber Park. A scenic trail links the park's parking and picnic areas to a tree-lined stretch of the river. A recent Village initiative allowed adding a splash pad, playground, and improved pavilion with a redesigned stage and more seating. These improvements allow for larger concerts and other prominent gatherings. A short way upriver, the smaller Greenway Park is home to the village's boat launch for canoeists and kayakers.

The Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, spanning 900 acres and managed by the Champaign County Forest Preserve District, flanks Mahomet's northern edge. Stewardship over this natural area is provided by the Upper Sangamon River Conservancy, a county-led nonprofit that holds its meetings at Mahomet's public library. The Museum of the Grand Prairie, also managed by the county, is along the river just outside Mahomet village limits.



City of Morris (14,650)



Morris stands out for cultivating connections to the Illinois & Michigan (I&M) Canal and the Illinois River. The City uses a canal image in its official marketing campaigns. It has invested heavily in Canalport Park (*see photo*), which has a canal boat replica, sculptures, a fishing area, and a pollinator garden. Canalport's picnic area is a popular stop for users of the sixty-one-mile I&M Canal State Trail, which has a bridge across the canal leading to it. Along the river, next to William G. Stratton State Park, Morris's smaller Riverside Park has a boat dock and picnic area.

The City is active in the I&M Canal National Heritage Association, collaborating to provide bike rentals and partnering to create a historical marker on the canal. Local nonprofit groups are strong supporters of Morris's canal agenda. I&M Canal Cleanup Coalition, based in the city, has a retail store and hosts canal cleanup days and an annual festival supported by municipal hotel-tax revenue. The Coalition joined the Grundy County Chamber of Commerce and local government to celebrate the canal's 175th birthday in 2023. Morris is home to the privately run Kayak Morris Campground, which comes to life during summer.



City of Ottawa (17,752)

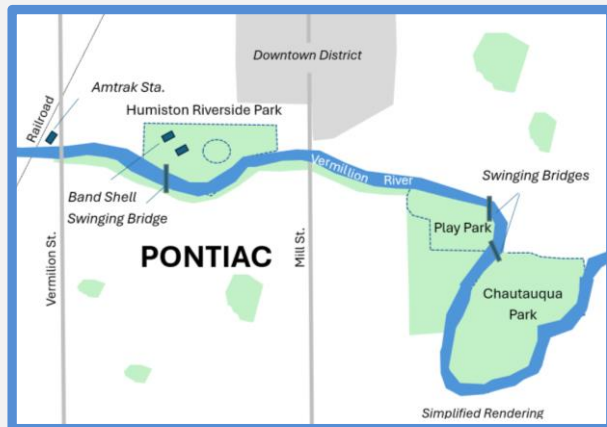


This "Town of Two Rivers" at the Illinois and Fox Rivers confluence stands out for its multi-generational efforts to integrate waterways into its initiatives. Allen Park (*see photo*) springs to life during the warm season. On the Illinois' north bank, the Downtown Waterfront is a hub for special events, including Ottawa Brew Fest, "Smoktober Fest" and public concerts. The Sainte Genevieve, an authentic sternwheel riverboat, docks nearby, offers rides and has been an impetus for enhancements to local passenger-vessel facilities.

Ottawa prioritizes environmental conservation, regularly planting trees and native plants. It is creating new high-profile amenities along the Illinois River. Fortuitously, a 20-acre site near downtown became available when a school relocated after a 2008 flood. The site has a new YMCA community complex and will soon have a park and amphitheater. The Fox River shoreline has the Ottawa Riverwalk, and the City has rewatered a section of the I&M Canal for canoeing and ice skating. Ottawa's Heritage Harbor Marina, several miles east of city hall is the result of extensive public-private collaboration and has several hundred residential units, 186 boat slips, and a hotel (*see photo on page 21*).



City of Pontiac (11,359)



On a winding stretch of the Vermilion River, Pontiac is the only featured community with *three* large riverfront parks. Each is reachable by walkers on iconic swinging bridges (see photo), two built in the early 1900s. The largest park, the 27-acre Chautauqua Park, is nearly surrounded by the river and has three picnic pavilions and a disc golf course. Play Park, along the opposite bank, has a playground area and splash pad.

The City's showpiece riverside amenity, Humiston-Riverside Park, is richly landscaped and covers five acres. Sometimes called "Duck Park," it has a riverwalk, splash pad, and band shell used for local Rockin' Round the River concerts during warm seasons and other events. The concerts attract many commercial sponsors and are funded by the Illinois Prairie Community Foundation.

A large mural near downtown depicts Pontiac's heritage. The summer programs at its parks cater to elementary-aged children. Plans for a community-led river cleanup, aiming to remove trash and debris, are underway.



Conclusions

Several general findings from our analysis warrant emphasis and are worthy of additional research:

- **The 25 Feature Communities show how waterfronts** can be leveraged for public benefit without large budgets or dedicated staff.
- **Recreational, cultural, and civic goals dominate** their efforts, although economic development goals are a significant consideration. Three-fourths of the communities have lost population since 2000, making it essential to capitalize on natural amenities to attract and retain residents.
- **Most successful communities have a strong champion** who sustains momentum from year to year. Few have comprehensive plans for their riverfronts or specialized river-focused zoning regulations. Most draw on the energy of civic groups outside of government.
- **Many cities have built strategies around attracting visitors from nearby state parks** or recreational trails. The number of visitors has risen sharply since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Nearly all municipalities activate their riverfronts** through civic events, festivals, and club gatherings that are not directly focused on the river but use these natural assets as scenic backdrops. Many have events into colder-weather months. Most make shelters, gazebos, or other facilities available for private use at a nominal cost.

Noteworthy challenges:

- **Few municipalities with populations below 5,000 have created prominent statewide attractions along rivers** that are magnets for tourism. Most focus on festivals and events primarily drawing people from 30 miles or less. Galena and Grafton are exceptions, each having river amenities and dining areas that attract visitors from afar.
- **Residential or hospitality developments on riverfront parcels are uncommon.** Few municipalities subsidize river-oriented

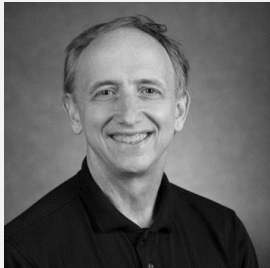
businesses. Among the reasons are chronic flooding, hefty levees, and modest economic growth, which tip the balance in favor of recreational and cultural initiatives.

- **Municipal governments generally lack the resources to engage in large-scale habitat preservation efforts** or directly manage wetlands, with Charleston and Monticello being notable exceptions. Nonetheless, many have strong relationships with nonprofit conservation organizations. Charleston, Rockton, and South Beloit are leaders in this regard.
- **The juxtaposition of governing bodies supporting river policy is complex.** Many

municipalities have independent park districts with separate elected boards and taxing authority. Many leverage partnerships with counties, nonprofit conservation districts, and state agencies to overcome budget hurdles. Few state grants are available to support the work of smaller municipalities.

Above all, however, the featured communities demonstrate the vast potential of municipal strategies related to rivers. Please refer to Page 18 for a tabular summary of their policies. Visit chaddick.depaul.edu for our webinars, events, and other river-focused activities, including those showcasing the featured communities.

AUTHOR INFORMATION



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We thank Zaria Bonds, Adam Flickinger, MaryAnn McGovern, Shamiso Gombera and the many local officials who provided input for this project. All opinions expressed are those of the Chaddick Institute and are not necessarily those of our sponsor or the featured communities. We welcome input from readers and media inquiries at chaddick@depaul.edu

Organizational Profile

Corn Belt Ports: Putting Illinois Ports on the Map

The ports belonging to Illinois municipalities have a relatively new organization working to meet their needs. Based in Moline, Corn Belt Ports (CBP) works to improve ports in the “Heart of the Corn Belt” region, covering the area above Locks and Dam 26 in Alton in the Upper Mississippi River System. This area is comprised of the Upper Mississippi River and Illinois Waterway. CBP leads efforts to strengthen rural, regional, multi-modal, inland ports by pursuing investments in manmade and natural infrastructure. These ports are a crucial part of the national and global supply chains and received significant funding from the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

CBP encompasses four regional ports collectively handling nearly 100 million tons of freight annually. The three port regions serving Illinois:

1) The *Illinois Waterway Ports Commission (IWPC)*, centered on the river cities of Havana, Peoria, and Ottawa, includes ten counties and 175.5 River Miles. The commission is in the center of the Illinois River Basin, which provides for nearly half of the state’s agricultural production and 90% of the state’s population.



A pontoon boat on the Illinois River at Ottawa.



A barge on the Mississippi River passes near East Alton, IL

2) The *Mid-America Port Commission* is at the confluence of the Upper Mississippi and Illinois Rivers and includes Quincy, IL, and Hannibal, MO.

3) The *Upper Mississippi River Ports (IL & IA)* are centered on the Quad Cities and include riverfront counties north to East Dubuque, IL.

CBT drives regional economic development and improves the quality of life in historically underserved rural riverfront communities. The organization works to attract public and private investment, expand commerce, and enhance aquatic habitats. It is a unique and pioneering U.S. port, with a Ph.D. in environmental science as its Director of Sustainability and Conservation.

Recently, CBP worked with IWPC to launch **the Illinois River Cities and Towns Initiative**, a mayor-led coalition that includes Havana, Henry, Morris, Oglesby, and Ottawa, all being featured communities.

Table 1: Characteristics of the 25 Featured Communities

MUNICIPALITY	COUNTY	RIVER	POPULATION (2023)	MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME (2022)	POVERTY RATE (2022)	MEDIAN PROPERTY VALUE (\$) (2022)
Bourbonnais	Kankakee	Kankakee	18,042	\$84,774	11.30%	\$267,077
Carlyle	Clinton	Kaskaskia	3,197	\$63,850	7.90%	\$157,105
Charleston	Coles	Embarras	17,028	\$46,488	26.50%	\$129,115
East Dubuque	Jo Daviess	Mississippi	1,485	\$61,067	6.50%	\$156,158
Elizabethtown	Hardin	Ohio	219	\$19,560	43.60%	\$70,924
Galena	Jo Daviess	Gelena	3,250	\$51,574	9.9%	\$185,727
Godfrey	Madison	Mississippi	17,597	\$79,283	6.70%	\$180,982
Grafton	Jersey	Illinois, Mississippi	765	\$87,833	10.20%	\$248,127
Hamilton	Hancock	Mississippi	2,689	\$48,315	9.30%	\$105,754
Havana	Mason	Illinois	2,827	\$51,753	19.90%	\$93,337
Henry	Marshall	Illinois	2,312	\$54,419	14.80%	\$121,749
Lacon	Marshall	Illinois	1,859	\$56,003	16.70%	\$112,173
Mahomet	Champaign	Vermilion	10,273	\$112,361	2.60%	\$112,361
Monticello	Piatt	Sangamon	6,018	\$76,573	8.40%	\$76,573
Morris	Grundy	Illinois, I&M Canal	14,508	\$72,283	5.7%	\$244,129
New Athens	St. Clair	Kaskaskia	1,873	\$61,257	9.10%	\$124,919
Newton	Jasper	Embarras	2,743	\$53,897	11.70%	\$95,547
Oglesby	LaSalle	Illinois, Vermillion	3,639	\$60,101	8.6%	\$131,201
Ottawa	LaSalle	Illinois, Fox, I&M C.	18,752	\$63,624	18.30%	\$149,426
Petersburg	Menard	Sangamon	2,197	\$69,206	17.20%	\$186,148
Pontiac	Livingston	Vermilion	11,010	\$54,011	10.10%	\$117,119
Rockton	Winnebago	Rock	7,768	\$111,556	6.20%	\$239,318
Rosiclare	Hardin	Ohio	955	\$40,495	19.90%	\$65,767
Savanna	Carroll	Mississippi	2,712	\$44,474	9.3%	\$68,082
South Beloit	Winnebago	Rock	7,893	\$79,129	8.80%	\$171,397

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Table 2. Policies and Program of 25 Featured Communities

Featured Community	Riverside Park (* behind levee, ** separated by highway, ^ maintained by local nonprofit, #overlook)	Festival(s) or large events along river (*on federal land)	Municipal Camp-ground (*privately run)	Public Boat launch	Nature Center along River	Amphitheater or performance stage	Largescale Habitat Preservation	Extensive Nonprofit Conservancy	Pedestrian Bridge(s)	Marina, full service	Historic Vehicular Bridge (*ferry, + former rail bridge)	Municipal trail or walkway along or over river, excl. state trails (* along lake)	Commemorative River History Display (* lighthouse)	Retail along shoreline (* hotel)
Bourbonnais	X		X*	X								X		
Carlyle	X	X*		X								X		
Charleston	X			X			X	X				X*		
East Dubuque	X#			X						X	X			
Elizabethtown	X			X										X*
Galena	X	X		X					X		X	X		
Godfrey	X^			X	X									
Grafton	X			X						X	X*	X	X*	X
Hamilton	X			X									X	
Havana	X		X	X	X	X						X		
Henry	X			X						X	X		X	
Lacon	X	X		X						X			X	
Mahomet	X			X			X	X						
Monticello	X			X			X	X			X*	X	X	
Morris	X		X*	X					X			X	X	
New Athens	X*	X	X	X										
Newton	X			X					X		X*			
Oglesby	X	X		X										
Ottawa	X			X		X				X	X*	X		X
Petersburg	X			X				X						X*
Pontiac	X	X	X	X		X			X					
Rockton	X	X		X		X		X				X		
Rosiclare	X			X										
Savanna	X	X		X						X				
South Beloit	X**			X	X			X				X		

Contact the study team for details about our categorizations. This is a dynamic table that is regularly updated as new information arrives.

Appendix: Methods of Analysis

This project, launched in September 2023, encompassed a five-step research process.

1. Geographic Information System Analysis

Spatial analysis was conducted to identify and highlight municipalities situated along riverfronts. Using ArcGIS Pro, the study team uploaded and analyzed shapefiles of Illinois rivers and cities to find intersections between these two layers. This process included mapping where municipalities and riverfronts overlapped. Such spatial analysis guided subsequent steps.

2. Google Earth and Data Analysis

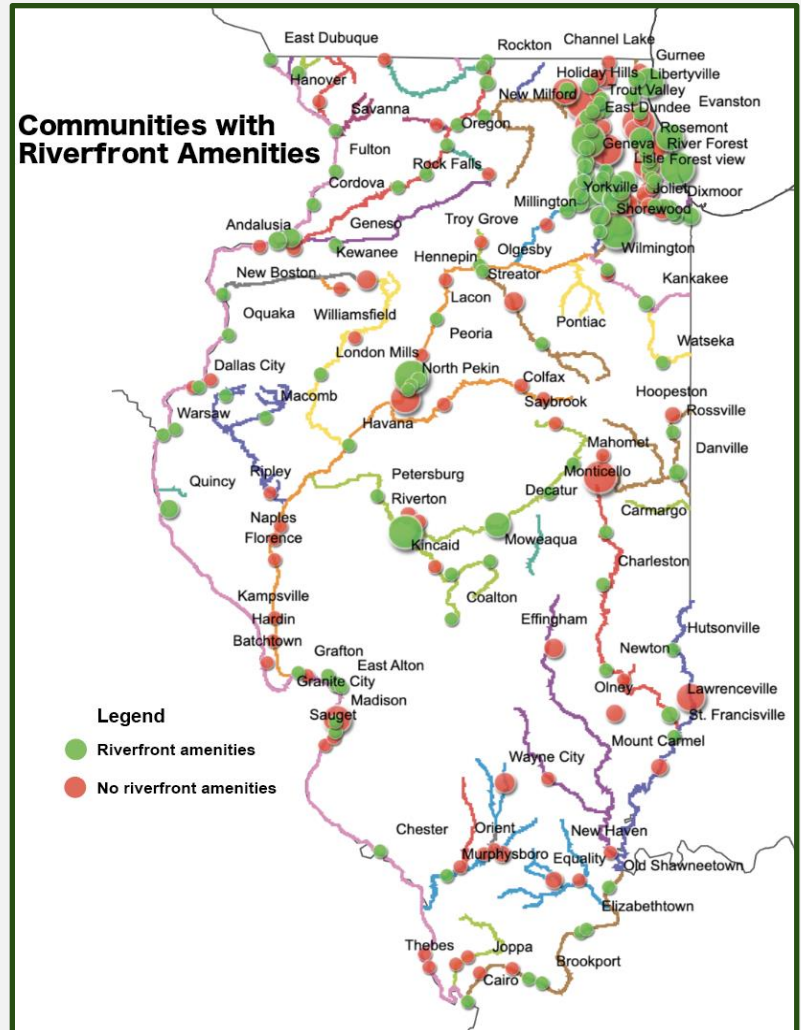
Google Maps, Google Earth, and local zoning maps were used to identify and catalog amenities lining the riverbanks of more than 120 municipalities with populations of less than 20,000. Although parks and ecological areas took precedence, attention was also directed toward community centers, libraries, public art installations, river walks, and trails. The analysis was then extended to assess whether municipal departments were involved in the development and upkeep of those areas. Several ArcView maps were created (see map).

3. Creating Contact List

Contacts for communities of interest were collected through municipal websites, conversations with chambers of commerce, and other sources. We identified individuals with local knowledge for fact-checking. In smaller communities, responsibility for policy and programs often falls on a mayor or city clerk.

4. Writing, Creating Custom Maps & Fact-Checking

We had informal conversations with municipal officials before selecting the 25 communities to be featured. After the narrative and custom maps were prepared, drafts of the narrative and map were sent to allow for



corrections, clarifications, and augmentations.

5. Site Visits

The study team visited 23 of the 25 communities, many of which involved meetings with local officials. The remaining two visits are slated for 2025. The team conducted all of the photography in this report except the Google Earth views in Elizabethtown and Rosiclare and the photos from Charleston, Lacon, and Morris, which came from local sources.

Chaddick Institute retains responsibility for the material, which does not necessarily represent local officials' views.

Photo Gallery

Images from the study team's visits to the Feature Communities.



A family fishing at Brittany Lake in Bourbonnais, a short distance from the Kankakee River.



A couple at Galena's Grant Park, with a Galena River pedestrian bridge in the distance.



Housing in Grafton elevated to reduce damage from periodic Mississippi River flooding.



Ottawa's Heritage Harbor marina and residential homes along the Illinois River.



A picnic at Riverfront Park in Havana, along a scenic stretch of the Illinois River



Outdoor activities at Lake Charleston, a reservoir along the Embarras River

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