Bradenton Riverwalk
East Expansion Research

Prepared by the Center for Active Design (CfAD)

In Partnership with:
THE BRADENTON RIVERWALK EAST EXPANSION RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Realize Bradenton, along with their partners, the City of Bradenton and Kimley-Horn, with grant support from the Knight Donor Advised Fund of Manatee Community Foundation, have embarked on Creating Together Bradenton, an ambitious effort to engage the community to develop ideas for the planned Bradenton Riverwalk East Expansion.

As part of this effort, they collaborated with the Center for Active Design to design and field the Bradenton Riverwalk East Expansion Survey. This survey has been used to gauge attitudes towards the existing Riverwalk, as well as preferences for the expansion eastward. The survey was completed by 884 residents, business owners, visitors, and other key stakeholders throughout the Bradenton area — an excellent response rate for a city of Bradenton’s size. The final results from the survey provide important insights to inform the creation of the Master Plan for the expansion, ensuring the project builds on the success of the existing Riverwalk while capturing residents’ and visitors’ vision for what Riverwalk East can become.

THE CENTER FOR ACTIVE DESIGN + ASSEMBLY

The Center for Active Design (CfAD) is a non-profit organization using design to foster healthy and engaged communities. CfAD is leading Assembly, a pioneering initiative funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to understand how the design and maintenance of public spaces can bolster civic life, drawing upon empirical evidence and original research efforts. The results from Bradenton’s survey will inform the broader the Assembly initiative, serving as a model for how citizen-driven, evidence-based design of public spaces can support overall community wellbeing.

KEY FINDINGS

This executive summary synthesizes key findings emerging from the Bradenton Riverwalk East Expansion Survey, and offers recommendations for applying these findings. Findings are organized across five major themes:

1. Enjoyment, Pride, and Community Identity
2. Diversity and Social Interaction
3. Access to Nature
4. Maintenance and Volunteerism
5. Navigation
1 Enjoyment, Pride, and Community Identity

• **People enjoy the existing Riverwalk immensely, visit frequently, and are very likely to recommend it to others.** Seventy-nine percent of respondents say the existing Riverwalk is “Very” or “Extremely Welcoming;” 91% have visited at least once in the last year, and fully 88% are “Very” or “Extremely Likely” to recommend it to others.

• **The Riverwalk is a popular destination in the context of a beloved city.** Ninety-four percent recommend Bradenton as a place to visit; 89% recommend it as a place to live; and 79% recommend it as a place to work.

• **There is a high level of awareness of and interest in the Riverwalk East Expansion.** Sixty-eight percent of respondents were aware of the plans for Riverwalk East Expansion and 50% noted that they wanted to stay apprised of new developments and receive invitations to planning meetings and other conversations.

• **The Riverwalk East Expansion provides an opportunity to showcase Bradenton’s history and local identity.** Sixty percent of respondents said they wanted more public art on the expansion and 30% wanted this art to highlight the history of the area. Assembly’s research indicates that public art can enhance civic trust by instilling pride and contributing to local character. People who report greater access to arts and culture in their community also demonstrate higher levels of civic trust, participation, and stewardship. They are significantly more likely to rate local leaders as effective, to attend local events, and to donate money to local organizations.¹

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Apply [placemaking](#) strategies that emphasize local identity and draw explicit connections between the Riverwalk East Expansion and Bradenton’s unique history. People clearly have a strong attachment to and love for the City of Bradenton. This community pride can be reflected through programming, wellness activities, public art, signage, and other design elements.

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**Placemaking:**

With community-based participation at its center, an effective Placemaking process capitalizes on a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, and it results in the creation of quality public spaces that contribute to people’s health, happiness, and well-being.

- [Project for Public Spaces](#)
Diversity and Social Interaction

- **The Riverwalk is rich with diversity.** One respondent said they loved “the accessible open space to share with citizens of all ages” while others mentioned they value how the Riverwalk makes “all feel welcome” and had an “atmosphere rich with diversity,” attracting a wide range of people “sharing the park together.” These responses are particularly compelling in an era where American neighborhoods are more politically, ethnically, and economically segregated than ever before. Urban parks like Bradenton Riverwalk provide crucial opportunities for intercultural and intergenerational interaction, and have been shown to support civic trust and participation in public life.

- **The Riverwalk serves as an important place for social interaction.** Seventy-nine percent of respondents have had at least one chance encounter with someone they knew on the Riverwalk in the last year, and 52% of respondents have met new people on the existing Riverwalk. Assembly research finds that these unexpected meetings in public spaces can help reinforce civic trust.

- **The Riverwalk East Expansion provides an opportunity to further increase social interaction.** Forty-four percent of respondents wish there were more places to eat on the current Riverwalk, and 56% would like to see new social gathering spaces on the expansion eastward. Assembly finds that formal and informal gathering spaces where all feel welcome can support civic trust and participation in public life.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Consider design options for the Riverwalk East Expansion that encourage diverse communities to gather and socialize with one another.

For example, provide space for food vendors, picnics, and small-scale events.

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**Civic Trust:**

When areas have high civic trust, residents feel they are part of a collective civic identity. They exhibit pride in their community and trust their neighbors—and their local government—to do what’s right.

- *Assembly, Center for Active Design*
3 Access to Nature

- **The Riverwalk is valued as an important place to walk, relax, and connect with nature.** The most popular reasons people visit the existing Riverwalk is to walk (75%) and enjoy the view (63%). This enjoyment of natural space yields important community benefits, since research shows that people who live in neighborhoods with access to nature and green space are more likely to report that they trust their neighbors and believe community members are willing to help each other.7

- **People want to build on the success of the existing Riverwalk.** Sixty percent of survey respondents said the top priority for the Riverwalk East Expansion is to provide more space to walk and relax near the river. Top preferences for new Riverwalk amenities reflect an appreciation for natural assets: 82% want a scenic overlook and 78% requested shaded areas for sitting and enjoying the view.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Prioritize access to nature and views in the Riverwalk’s expansion eastward.

Celebrate the Riverwalk as an important place to connect with nature. Continue to provide places for walking, biking, or relaxing in the shade and enjoying the view.

4 Maintenance and Volunteerism

- **Respondents think the existing Riverwalk is well-maintained.** Only 8% reported that poor maintenance was their least favorite thing about the Riverwalk. This high level of satisfaction with upkeep is critical, as Assembly research indicates that the maintenance of public spaces is directly related to community pride, trust in local government, and trust in one another. Studies indicate that maintenance of playgrounds and other amenities for children is particularly important, since these amenities are associated with negative impacts on civic pride and trust when in disrepair.8
• **Respondents envision new amenities to support ongoing maintenance at the Riverwalk.** They suggested providing additional trash cans (38% of respondents), and positive signage encouraging people to clean up after themselves (22%). For Riverwalk East, they also envisioned trash cans as functional public art to encourage additional litter-cleanup (29% of respondents.)

• **People are interested in volunteering at the Riverwalk.** Forty-two percent of survey respondents are at least “somewhat interested” in volunteering — much higher than the national average. That proportion jumps to an impressive 64% for respondents that live in the Riverwalk East neighborhood. Moreover, residents suggested a variety of ways they’d like to volunteer, including gardening (18%), and litter pick-up (13%). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 25% of Americans volunteer their time with organizations (the lowest rate in decades) and the bulk of those volunteers do so with religious organizations (33%) or educational/youth service organizations (25%) as opposed to public parks.9

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Sustain excellent maintenance and operations conditions for the Riverwalk East Expansion.**

Provide amenities, such as enhanced trash cans, to involve visitors and residents in maintenance efforts and foster norms around stewardship.

**Consider formalizing a Riverwalk Volunteer Program to capitalize on the high level of interest in volunteerism relative to the Riverwalk.**

Based on the successful community outreach of the Creating Together Bradenton initiative, develop on-going ways to keep residents informed of the progress of the Riverwalk East expansion and on-going engagement to develop public art and programming.

5 **Navigation**

• **The Riverwalk is valued as an important place to walk, relax, and connect with nature.** With the extension of the Riverwalk, visitors will be able to walk or bike the entirety of the 2.2 miles along the river in the future. This is clearly an appealing notion – 89% of respondents say they are likely to bike or walk the entire distance. Respondents also advocate for distance markers (49%), increased lighting (42%), and rest areas (39%) to make traveling the entirety of the Riverwalk feel more enticing and safe. Assembly finds that walkable areas within cities have been linked to higher social capital and community cohesion10, neighborliness and positive relationships with neighbors11, and sense of community.12

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Use design to facilitate walking or biking along the Riverwalk.**

Consider design-based encouragements like distance markers, enhanced lighting, or rest areas.
CITATIONS


