

City and Tourism Sault Ste. Marie

Waterfront Design Plan - What We Heard



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PREPARED FOR

City and Tourism Sault Ste. Marie

DATE

Winter 2024

PREPARED BY

O2 Planning and Design

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Introduction

These are exciting times for The Soo, with many new developments being completed and contemplated, including the Downtown Plaza, SooMRKT, and the Queen Street Improvements. The new owners of Station Mall are investing. What a fantastic time to explore the future of the waterfront. It's a waterfront long held as a key asset and the heart of the city, a place where residents and visitors are drawn to throughout all seasons. The structure of this kind of place are there with many great civic uses clustered along the waterfront – library, city hall, art galleries – with close proximity to Queen Street. We are thrilled to work with Tourism Sault Ste Marie, the City of Sault Ste. Marie, and Destination Northern Ontario to craft a future vision for the city's waterfront that is compelling and achievable. To write a new narrative that is rooted in the city's rich natural and cultural heritage and captures the imagination of the city.

THE ASSIGNMENT

The Waterfront Design Plan is the chance to stitch these places together and identify catalytic opportunities that will transform the waterfront into a cohesive and vibrant place for everyone. Significant work has been undertaken over the past decades to find ways to elevate the quality and experience of the waterfront. Now is the time to consolidate and build upon these ideas and push forward with a plan that is visionary and achievable. A plan that is rooted in the natural and cultural heritage of the area while reaching for a new future that the city has been seeking.

There are many great things occurring in the city that is preparing it for the vision the Waterfront Design Plan will create. The Downtown Plaza and the new SooMRKT create a new downtown hub for public life. New ownership is investing in the Station Mall. These are fantastic developments that the Waterfront Design Plan can build from. As some industry wanes and the recognition of the value of public space grows, the waterfront is primed to achieve it's potential. Together with the public and stakeholders, we are thrilled at the opportunity to create this vision.

The Waterfront Design Plan will transform the existing waterfront into a tourist destination and improve the quality of life for local residents.

The Waterfront Design Plan will be a highly effective exercise in tourism, community development and place making. Taking into consideration existing infrastructure along the waterfront; this initiative presents an opportunity to develop a plan that will support opportunities for tourism and economic development and has the potential to transform or enhance the existing waterfront to a world-class feature and help put Sault Ste. Marie “on the map”. To this end, we are encouraged to ‘think outside the box’ and focus on the waterfront areas as a “Destination.”

WHAT WE HEARD

In its mission to transform the future of its Waterfront, the waterfront design program has committed to innovative and robust public engagement – seeking input from many voices, inviting open and direct dialog, and encouraging participation throughout the design process.

In Phase 1 of the Sault Ste. Marie Waterfront Design Plan project, the design team, City Staff and community Stakeholders engaged in an intensive three day Integrated Design Process from December 13th to 15th, where people from the Community contributed ideas – at public pop-ups, workshops, via a project website and many other ways. The diversity and creativity of these community-generated ideas is a key source of insight and priorities for the design team in order to develop the Project Vision. A public survey was launched via the project website to gather residents' thoughts on their vision for the future of the waterfront. The survey asked respondents to share the types of activities, events, and programming they currently do, as well as those wish to be able to participate in once the project is complete. The survey was live from December 11th, 2023 to January 5th, 2024, and received a large number of responses from a diversity of resident demographics. The uptake on this particular survey was significantly larger than past surveys hosted by the City, indicating an overwhelming interest and appreciation for the waterfront and its future.

This level of community engagement is what is needed to fulfill a principle goal of creating a Waterfront for All. The following report represents a summary of “What We Heard” and becomes a significant source for the overall Vision and Master Plan. In March of 2024, a Draft Master Plan will be revealed to the public and stakeholders through a similar process of public pop-ups, workshops, public survey and other ways to receive feedback on the design progress. Check back on the project website for more information when it becomes available.

Public Outreach

What does it mean to create a partnership between the City of Sault Ste. Marie and the entire community? In its mission to transform the future of its Waterfront, the waterfront design program has committed to innovative and robust public engagement – seeking input from many voices, inviting open and direct dialog, and encouraging participation throughout the design process. This level of community engagement is what is needed to fulfill a principle goal of creating a Waterfront for All.

MOBILIZING COMMUNITY INTEREST

To engage the community, we must reach them. The Design Team has used a variety of methods to pique interest in the possibilities for the waterfront and convert that interest into active participation. A full communications plan was developed which included:

Email invitations to key stakeholders to participate in workshops and interviews that took place over three days from December 13th to 15th, 2023;

Webpage content to include project information, timeline, engagement opportunities, link to a survey and interactive map for a new website launched in early December (<https://saultstemarie.ca/waterfront>);

Outreach emails and email notices to broad stakeholder list with brief project description, link to webpage, call to action and poster PDF;

Council notice to all City Council including invites to participate in workshops and interviews;

Pop-Up Boards for events on December 13th and 14th, 2023 at the Soo Market and Plaza, Station Mall, and the John Rhodes Community Centre;

Outdoor posters throughout the City and distributed to local businesses, stakeholders and posted in key City facilities;

Postcards distributed at pop-ups and design workshops, and distributed to local businesses, stakeholders, and placed in key City facilities;

Social media posts and ads on City social media platforms;

Radio advertisements; and

Newspaper ads and articles (<https://www.sootoday.com/local-news/city-wants-you-to-float-ideas-for-new-waterfront-vision-7976665>)



SAULT STE. MARIE
WATERFRONT DESIGN PLAN

The City of Sault Ste. Marie is developing a new vision for the waterfront—and we need your help!

The Waterfront Design Plan is our chance to stitch great places together along the water’s edge and identify opportunities that will transform the waterfront into a cohesive and vibrant place for all.

PROJECT TIMELINE

Phase 1: Creating the Vision Dec 2023 – Jan 2024	Phase 2: Design Concepts Jan – Mar 2024	Phase 3: Final Waterfront Design Plan Mar 2024
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GET INVOLVED!

SURVEY
Complete the visioning survey before January 5th.

INTERACTIVE MAPPING TOOL
Share your favourite memories and your vision for the waterfront!



SAULT STE. MARIE WATERFRONT DESIGN PLAN

The City of Sault Ste. Marie is developing a new vision for the waterfront – and we need your help!

The waterfront of Sault Ste. Marie is a spectacular place with amazing potential to become a true destination for both residents and visitors. Together, the City of Sault Ste. Marie, Tourism Sault Ste. Marie and Destination Northern Ontario are creating a Waterfront Design Plan to guide the development of the Soo's waterfront in the future.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

What is a Waterfront Design Plan?

The Waterfront Design Plan will be an action plan that guides future development, infrastructure, and public realm investments, including strategies for implementation.

The Waterfront Design Plan is our chance to stitch great places together along the water's edge and identify opportunities that will transform the waterfront into a cohesive and vibrant place for all.

The plan will support opportunities for tourism and economic development, and has the potential to enhance the existing waterfront to transform it into a world-class destination and help put Sault Ste. Marie "on the map!"



PROJECT TIMELINE



GET INVOLVED!
Ready to share your vision for the waterfront?

Complete the Survey:
Scan the QR code to complete the visioning survey before January 5th.

Put a pin on the map:
Using the interactive mapping tool, share your favourite memories and your vision for the waterfront.

PROGRAMMING

EVENTS

WHAT WOULD MAKE THE WATERFRONT A MORE WELCOMING AND ENJOYABLE PLACE?

WHAT ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS WOULD LIKE TO SEE ALONG THE WATERFRONT?

SAULTSTEMARIE.CA/WATERFRONT

SAULTSTEMARIE.CA/WATERFRONT

SAULT STE. MARIE WATERFRONT DESIGN PLAN

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PROJECT TIMELINE

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Dec 2023 - Jan 2024

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SAULTSTEMARIE.CA/WATERFRONT

SAULT STE. MARIE WATERFRONT DESIGN PLAN

The City of Sault Ste. Marie is developing a new vision for the waterfront—and we need your help!

The Waterfront Design Plan is our chance to stitch great places together along the water's edge and identify opportunities that will transform the waterfront into a cohesive and vibrant place for all.

WHAT IS A WATERFRONT DESIGN PLAN?
It is an action plan that outlines development, infrastructure, and public realm strategies for tourism and economic growth, elevating Sault Ste. Marie to a world-class destination!

SAULTSTEMARIE.CA/WATERFRONT

SAULT STE. MARIE PROJECT TIMELINE

Phase 1: Creating the Vision
Dec 2023 - Jan 2024

Phase 2: Design Concepts
Jan - Mar 2024

Phase 3: Final Waterfront Design Plan
Mar 2024

Create a collective vision and strategic goals for the future of the waterfront.

Present design concepts for the overall waterfront project area and focal areas.

Share and celebrate the final Waterfront Design Plan!

SAULT STE. MARIE GET INVOLVED!

Ready to share your vision for the waterfront? There are several ways for you to share your ideas during Phase 1 of the project:

SURVEY
Visit the link to complete the visioning survey before January 5th.

PUT A PIN ON THE MAP
Using the interactive mapping tool, share your favourite memories and your vision for the waterfront.

SAULTSTEMARIE.CA/WATERFRONT

Integrated Design Process and Public Outreach: What We Heard

TURNING COMMENTS INTO A VISION

Throughout the three day Integrated Design Process, people from the Community contributed ideas – at public pop-ups, workshops, via the project website and many other ways. The diversity and creativity of these community-generated ideas is a key source of insight and priorities for the design team in order to develop the Project Vision. The following are just some of the most common themes and ideas that emerged:

SAFETY Increased safety along the waterfront includes more activation and more people/foot traffic to create safer environments, principles of CPTED, better lighting, emergency call stations, safe pedestrian street crossings and connections from downtown to the waterfront, and ensuring accessibility for all.

CONNECTIONS The future waterfront is envisioned as a place of movement – movement of all types of transportation, including vehicles, parking, pedestrian, bicycle and public transport to better serve those traveling east, west, north and south.

PATHWAYS The waterfront should feature better continuity of the waterfront trail and active movement spaces, including pathways for running, walking, biking and other activities, as well as in-water activities like boating and kayaking or places that let people “touch the water.”

PARKS AND PUBLIC SPACES The tremendous energy and interest around public open spaces includes a desire for flexibility - a mix of places to gather and sit in solace, and places to run, play and be active. Flexibility also means spaces that take advantage of all seasons and more spaces and places for family activities like play structures, splash pads and swimming.

VIEWES Whether it’s leisure areas to maximize views or terraced water edges to view sunsets, take photos and view ships - new and unique access to the view to and across the River is an asset to exploit.

HABITAT The waterfront is also a place for habitat and biodiversity, and many people connected to the idea of opportunities for more trees and native vegetation, floating wetlands, to interact with and see in-water habitat with coves and marsh environments, preserving local habitat areas, and to create a shoreline edge with access to beaches and places to walk and sit along the water.

Design with **CLIMATE CHANGE** in mind with respect to sea level rise, increased storm events, changes in days of extreme heat, reduction of impermeable surfaces, Green infrastructure, Energy efficiency, improving water quality from runoff and pollutants entering the river,

ARTS AND CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT To activate a public space, it must attract activity, including places to eat, drink and picnic, outdoor concerts, street markets, festivals, cultural celebrations, and large and small performances. This could also showcase indigenous place-keeping, public art, and include installations and displays that are interactive and evolving, both temporary and permanent to create a more dynamic environment.

We also heard valuable feedback on what the design should avoid, such doubling or repeating programs that already exist within the City, including ice skating in the Plaza and skate loop in Clergue Park, picnicking, performances that would compete with the Bondar Pavilion and Bellevue Plaza, and markets that already take place in the Soo Markt. This input, as much as what the public wants to see, was critical to shaping the Vision.

In addition, comments not only highlighted the kinds of spaces that people want to see, but also the spaces they already enjoy that could be enhanced, expanded upon or better connected to the Waterfront – such as the Bondar Pavilion, the Soo Markt and Plaza, and the Bushplane Museum and Brewery. These reference points of beloved Soo City spaces were also instrumental in creating a truly “Soo” design.



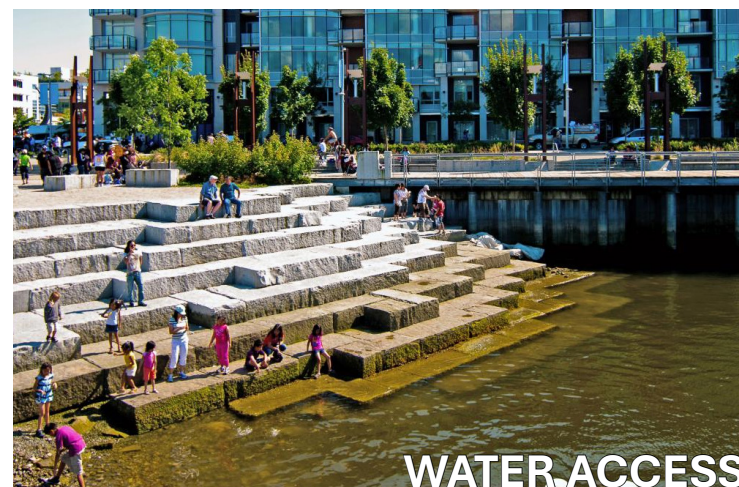
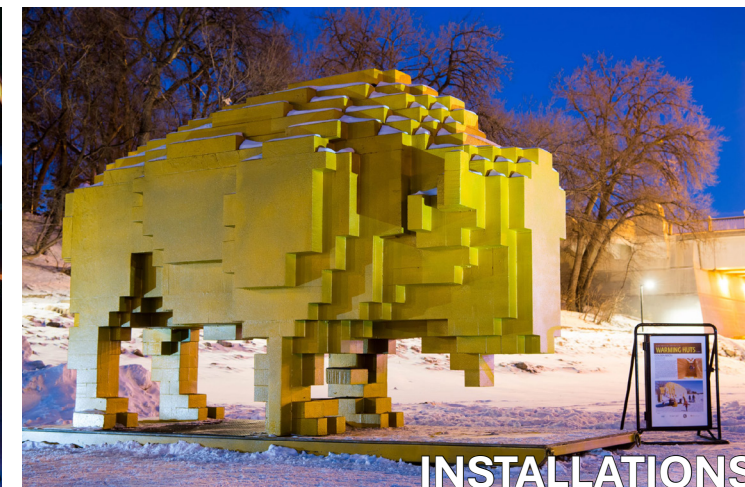
Program Precedents





Primary Program Elements

5+ VOTES



3 VOTES



SITTING



GREEN PARKING



FESTIVALS



PUBLIC ART



EATING



ICE SKATING



LIGHTING



FOOD TRUCKS



BOATING



BIKING

2 VOTES



DRINKING



FAMILY ACTIVITIES



CROSSINGS



BEACHES



WETLANDS



HABITAT



ACTIVE FRONTAGE



CRUISING



EXERCISING



FISHING



SUNSETS



BRIDGING



EDUCATION



LOCAL EVENTS



HISTORY



POP-UPS

1 VOTE



Public Survey Highlights

In Phase 1 of the Sault Ste. Marie Waterfront Design Plan project, a public survey was launched to gather residents' thoughts on their vision for the future of the waterfront. The survey asked respondents to share the types of activities, events, and programming they currently do, as well as those wish to be able to participate in once the project is complete.

The survey was live from December 11th, 2023 to January 5th, 2024, and received a large number of responses from a diversity of resident demographics. The uptake on this particular survey was significantly larger than past surveys hosted by the City, indicating an overwhelming interest and appreciation for the waterfront and its future.

BY THE NUMBERS

911

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

3,713

COMMENTS

1,554

SURVEY PAGE VIEWS

Outreach and Promotion

The survey was promoted to residents through the following channels:

- Sault Ste. Marie website and social media channels
- News releases on City website and on SooToday.com
- Notice to City Council notifying them of the project
- Outreach emails to key stakeholders notifying them of the project
- Pop-up events encouraged participants to complete the survey online
- Posters and postcards distributed at key locations

WHO PARTICIPATED?

GENDER OF RESPONDENTS

62%
FEMALE

33%
MALE

5%
OTHER /
PREFER NOT TO ANSWER

AGE OF RESPONDENTS

42%
40-64 YEARS OLD

34%
25-39 YEARS OLD

14%
65-79 YEARS OLD

4%
19-24 YEARS OLD

6%
OTHER AGES /
PREFER NOT TO ANSWER

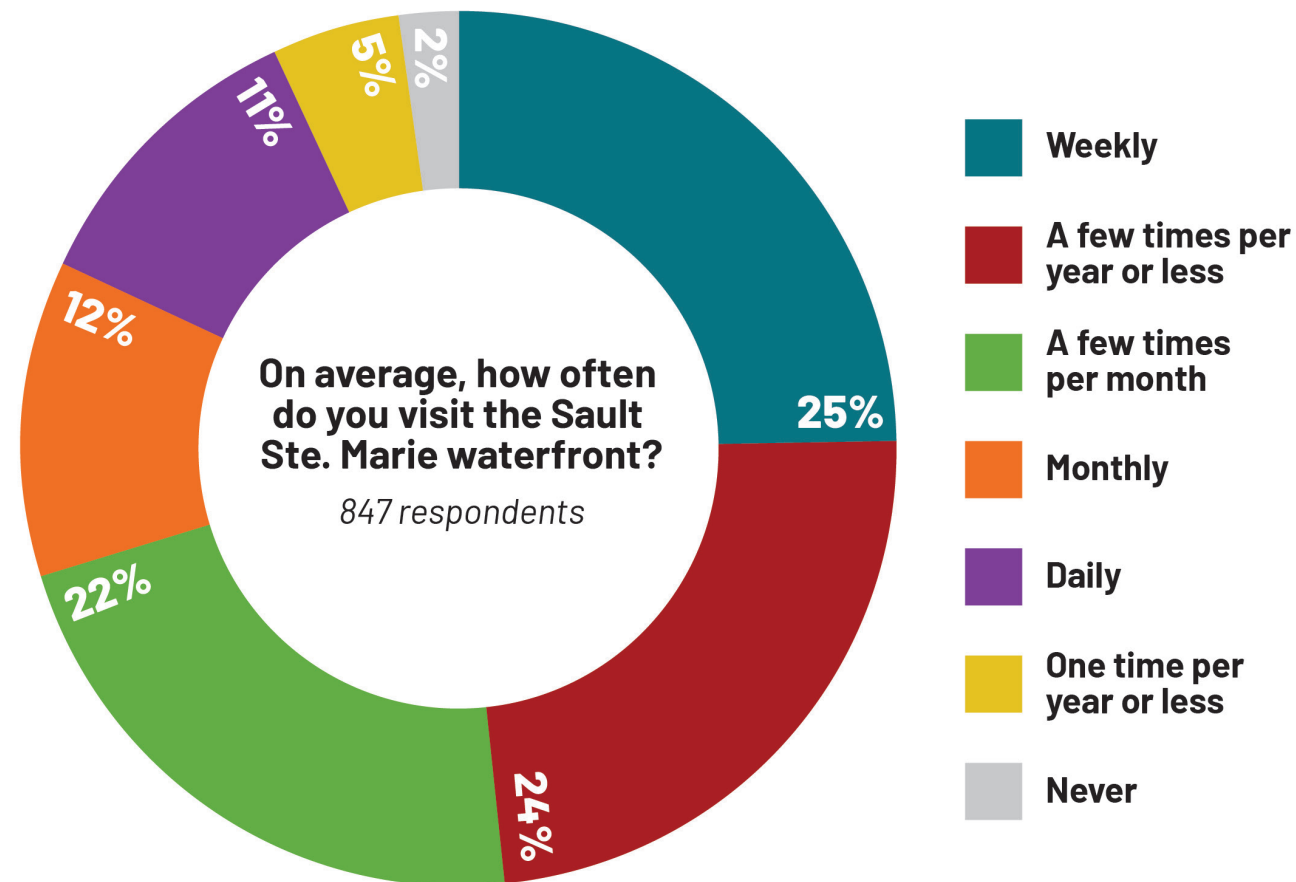
An **optional** question asked participants whether they belonged to a series of identities or demographic groups.

This question was asked to assist the project team in understanding how different user groups experience Sault Ste. Marie's waterfront and to ensure that all user groups feel like they belong and can participate in activities that are meaningful to them.

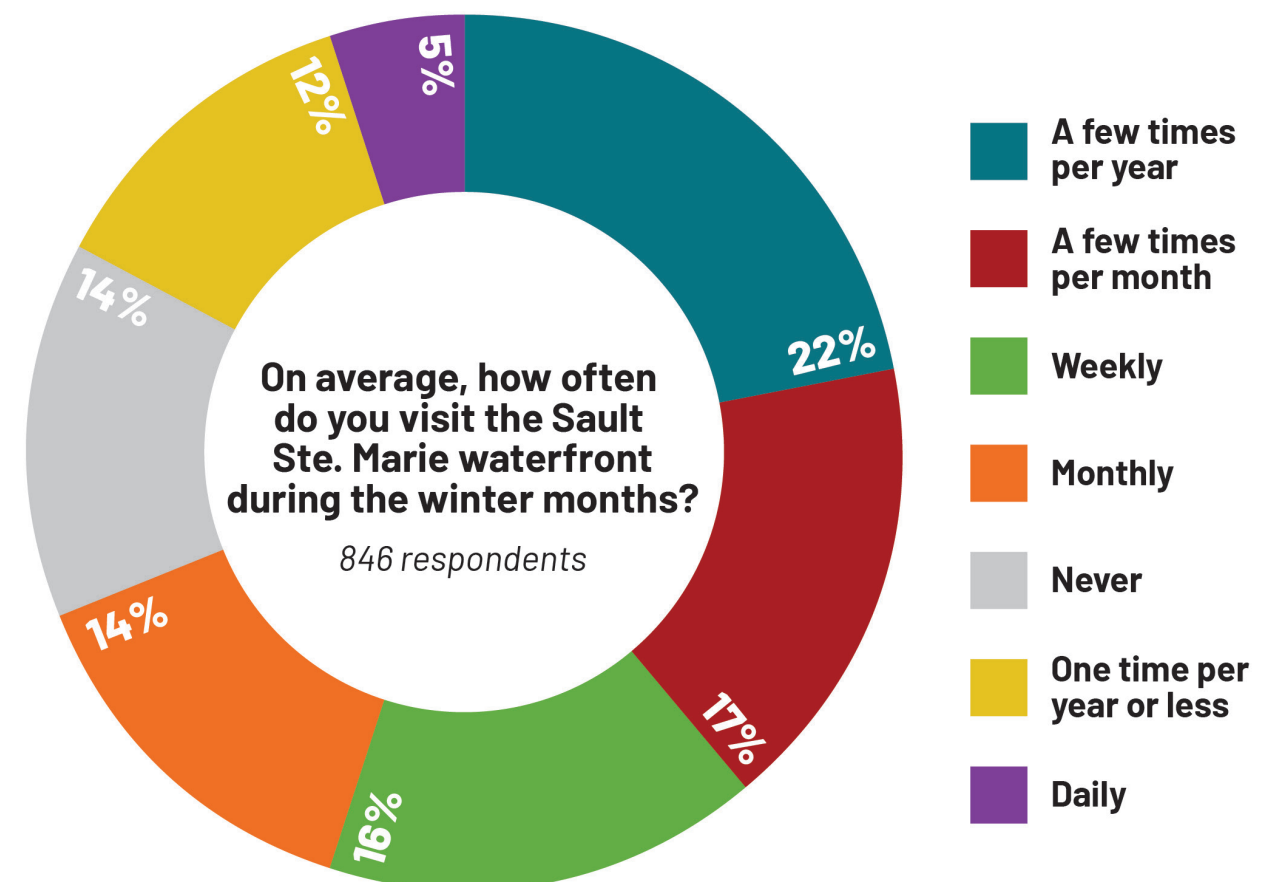
PARTICIPANT IDENTITIES

- + **50%** I am a dog owner
- + **34%** I am a parent to children under the age of 18
- + **14%** I have lived in Sault Ste. Marie for less than 5 years
- + **9%** I am First Nations, Inuit or Métis
- + **8%** I have a disability (visible or invisible)
- + **7%** I was born outside of Canada
- + **7%** I identify as LGBTQ2S+
- + **3%** I identify as a visible minority
- + **3%** I moved to Canada within the last 5 years

Visitor Patterns

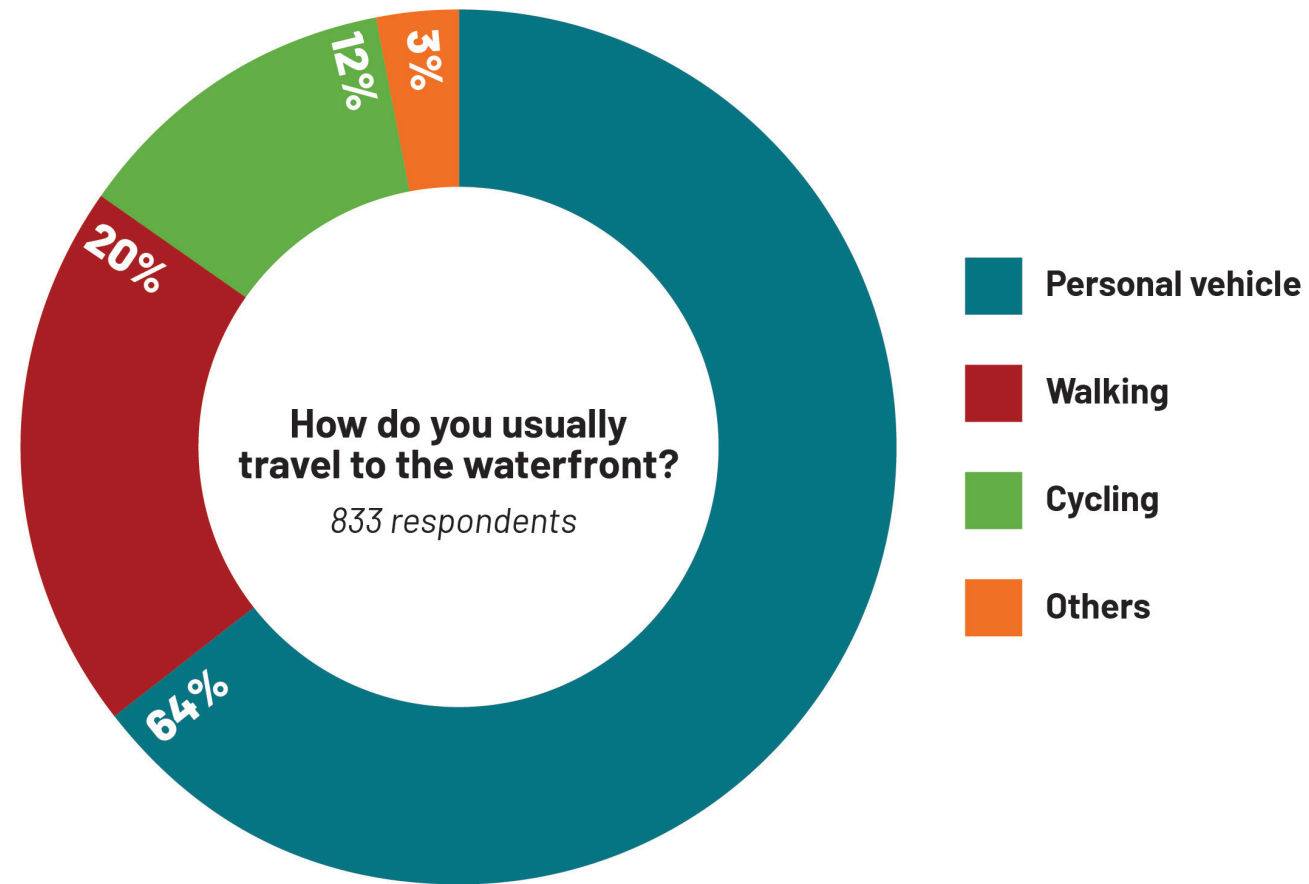


- + **25%** of survey respondents **visit the waterfront weekly** and **11%** **visit the waterfront daily**.
- + A large percentage of respondents are infrequent visitors to the waterfront, ranging from visiting **a few times per year or less (24%)** to visiting **one time per year or less (5%)**.



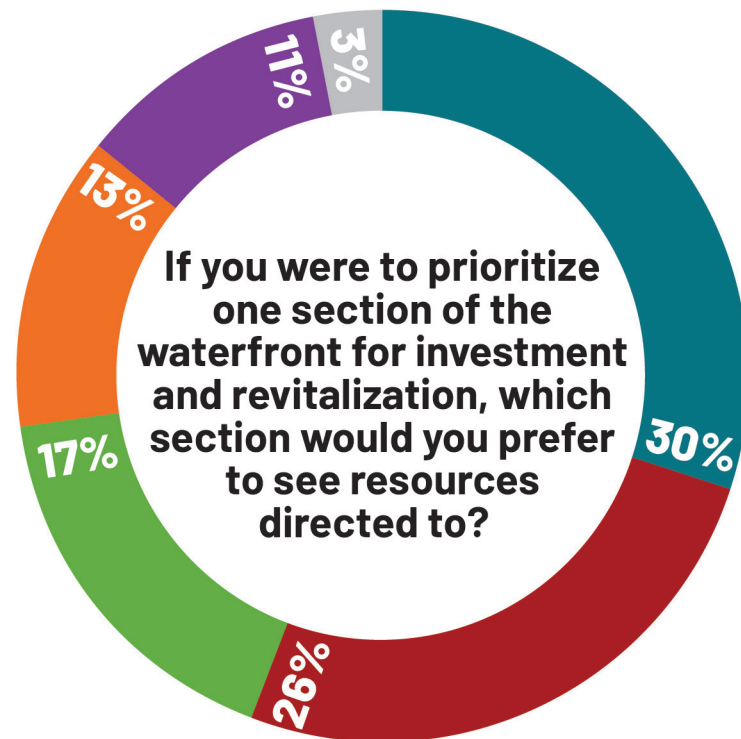
- + **Winter visitation** on the waterfront is significantly lower. **14%** of participants indicated that they **never visit the waterfront during the winter months**.
- + **Daily visitors** drops from **11% to 5%** and **weekly visitors** drops from **25% to 16%**, on average, during winter months.
- + Rates of infrequent visitors does not dramatically change when considering winter months, suggesting that winter events or activities along the waterfront (e.g., Bon Soo winter carnival, skating trail) draw people to the water regardless of seasonality.

Visitor Patterns



- + Travel to the waterfront by **personal vehicle** is the most common at **64%**.
- + Some participants are **walking (20%)** or **cycling (12%)** to the waterfront, and other modes of transportation are very infrequent (**3%**).

Priority Areas at the Waterfront



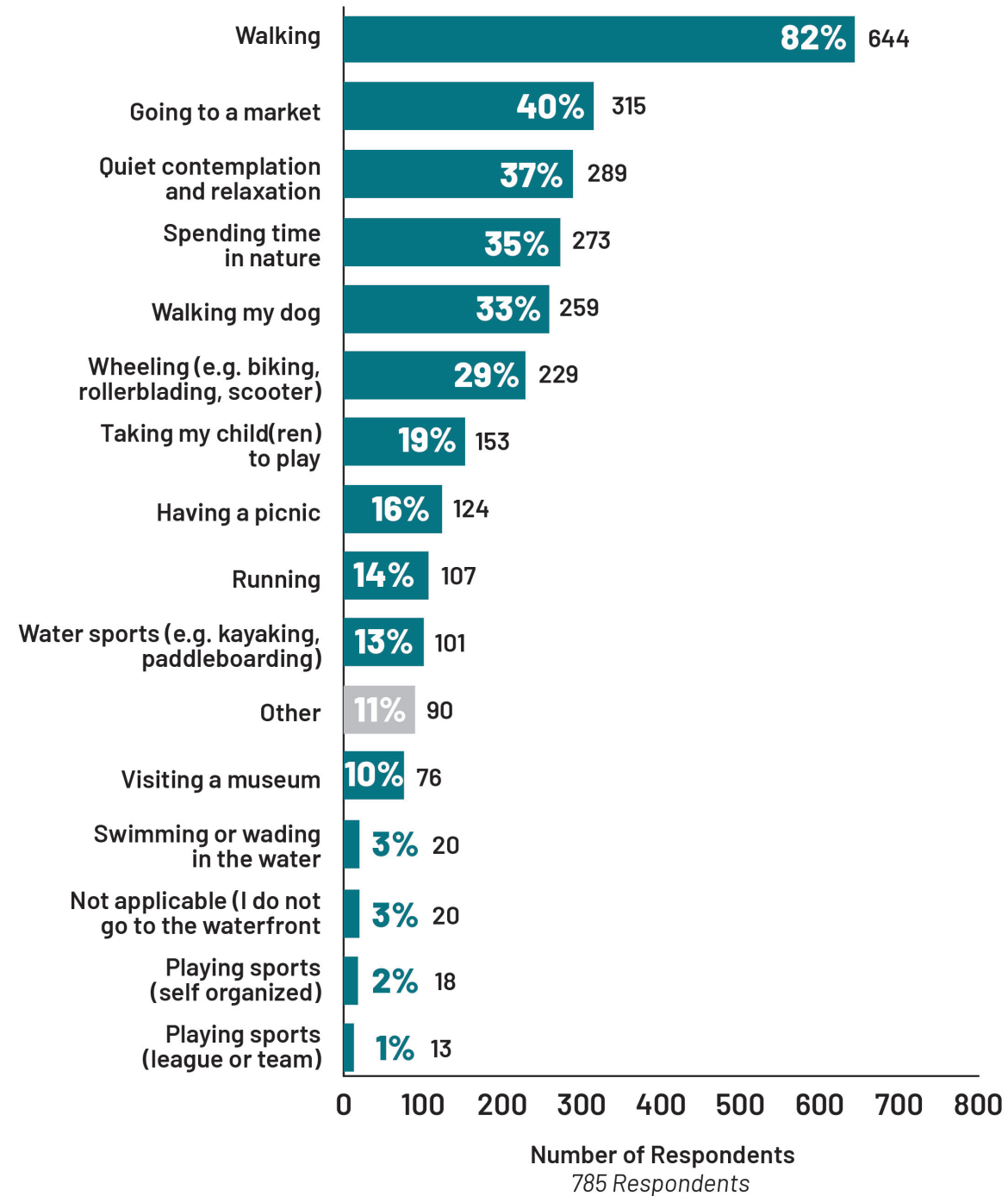
541 Respondents

- **Section 2:** Mall District (includes areas near Station Mall and GFL Memorial Gardens)
- **Section 5:** Community Health District (includes areas near the old hospital, Ministry of Natural Resources and Riverwalk Condos)
- **Section 3:** Harbour District (includes areas near Roberta Bondar Park and Tent Pavillion, Roberta Bondar Marina, City Hall and John Rowswell Hub Trail Monument)
- **Section 4:** Cultural District (includes areas near Canadian Bushplane Heritage Centre, Art Gallery of Algoma and Ermatinger Clergue National Historic Site)
- **Section 1:** Canal District (includes areas near Agawa Canyon Tour Train, Algoma Conservatory of Music and Gateway Casinos)
- Other

- + When asked to prioritize a section of the waterfront for investment and revitalization, many participants indicated that the **Mall District (30%)** and **Community Health District (26%)** are the section of the waterfront they wish to see improved.
- + These areas, as indicated in text-based responses to other questions, are described as being unsightly, lacking amenities, and feeling less safe than other sections of the waterfront.

Current State: Activities Along the Water's Edge

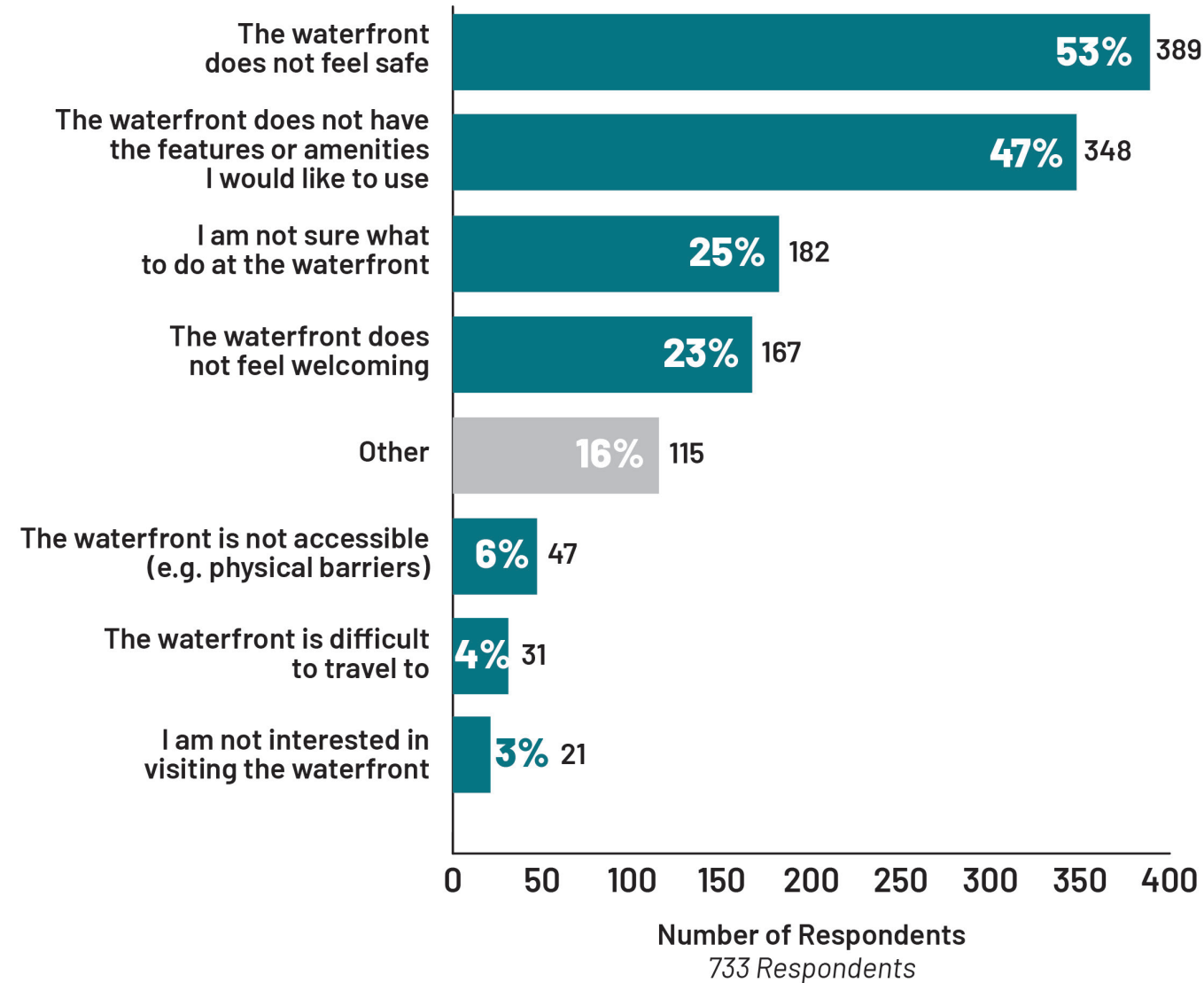
When you visit Sault Ste. Marie's Waterfront, what types of activities do you participate in? Select all that apply.



- + Most respondents indicated that they visit Sault Ste. Marie's waterfront to **walk (82%)** or **go to a market (40%)**.
- + **Quiet contemplation and relaxation (37%)** and **spending time in nature (35%)** were common responses, and align with respondents' desire to see connection to nature as a theme for waterfront development (see p. 65).
- + **Active recreation** is somewhat common (**wheeling, 29%; running, 14%; watersports, 13%**), though participants indicate in other responses that they wish to do more. For example, **29% of respondents currently "wheel" at the waterfront**, and **49% would like to be able to do this in the future**.
- + **34%** of survey respondents indicated that they are a **parent to children under the age of 18**, yet only **19% take their children to the waterfront to play**.

Barriers and Challenges to Accessing the Water's Edge

Which of the following barriers do you experience accessing the waterfront? Select all that apply.



+ **Safety (53%)** and **lack of features and amenities (47%)** are the main barriers that prevent people from visiting the waterfront.

What do you think is the biggest challenge for Sault Ste. Marie waterfront to overcome?

Responses to this question are in alignment with barriers that residents experience. These barriers act as the biggest challenge for the waterfront to overcome in order for residents of Sault Ste. Marie to feel more comfortable spending time at the water more often.

- **Safety:** Participants described the ways that the waterfront feels unsafe to them and prevents them from wanting to access existing features and amenities. References to crime and drug use were common, though only a few respondents indicated preferred solutions to this problem (e.g., support services, security presence, etc.).
- **Lack of Amenities:** Participants indicate that family friendly activities and basic amenities such as washrooms would help to draw them to the water's edge.
- **Retail Opportunities:** Participants were keen to provide solutions to the barriers they experience, and noted that food and beverage options, bike rentals and other retailers would be likely to draw them to the waterfront.

Waterfront Memories

Share a waterfront memory! This could be a story about your time on the waterfront, your favourite spot, or a unique piece of information about the area.

When asked to share a memory they have at the Sault Ste. Marie waterfront, responses ranged from simple day-to-day activities like having lunch by the water, to childhood memories like playing at the park or fishing, to memorable events like taking their wedding photos or attending Bon Soo.

- + **Events:** Participants have fond memories of events that take place at the Sault Ste. Marie waterfront, including markets, large events and concerts. Specific references were made to the Tent Pavillion at Roberta Bondar Park, watching the fireworks, and events like Bon Soo.
- + **Enjoying the Sights:** Participants appreciate unprogrammed leisure time at the water's edge, with walking, spending time in nature, appreciating the scenery as common memories.
- + **Along the Water:** Participants mention the times they've sat and watched boats pass, went fishing or kayaking, and other water-centric activities.
- + **Retail and Civic Spaces:** Places like parks and libraries, as well as retail options like Beavertails, contribute to respondents' positive experiences along the waterfront.

*“We use the waterfront for our bicycle rides, walking, attending special events and the farmers market in the summer. **People that visit from out of town often remark how fortunate we are to have such a great downtown and waterfront.**”*

*“I love the connections that the **Hub Trail and bike lanes have made** in our city allowing people in all areas of town to get there safely to enjoy the many activities throughout the seasons. **I love the family events, especially Rotary Fest that bring people together.**”*

*“My first winter after after moving back (after 35 years) I brought my 83 year old mother to Clergue Park in the winter to watch the skaters. **It was like a Norman Rockwell painting.**”*

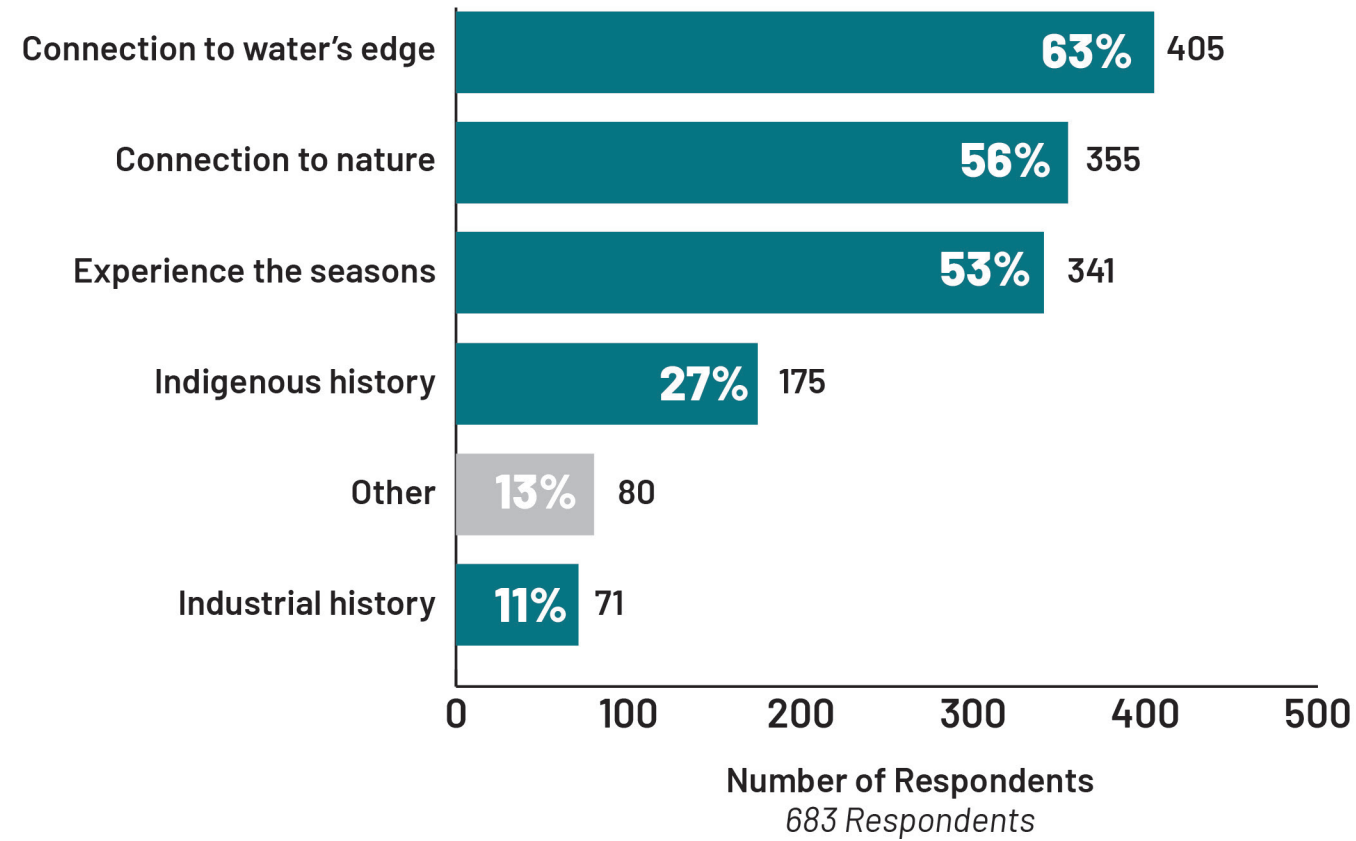
— Visioning Exercise

What three words would you use to describe the waterfront as it exists today?



Design Themes

Which of the following themes do you think is most important to incorporate into the design of the waterfront?



- + Participants' preferred themes for the Sault Ste. Marie waterfront all point to a desire for a nature-focused water's edge, with connection to the water, nature, and the seasons.
- + Themes of history were less preferred, though could be highlighted through placemaking and interpretive panels, particularly to ensure Indigenous history is well-represented.

Amenities and Precedents

Is there anything that would make the waterfront a more welcoming and enjoyable place for you (e.g. make you visit more often, make you feel more welcome)?

Participants reiterated many of the common challenges and barriers alluded to in other survey questions, including:

- **Safety and security:** Suggestions include more lighting, security and police presence, and addressing people struggling with addiction and mental health challenges.
- **Lack of amenities:** Suggestions include multi-use paths, rock climbing wall, outdoor fitness areas, seating options and washrooms.
- **Desire for retail opportunities:** Suggestions include kayak or snowshoe rental, cafes, restaurants, stores, souvenir shops, and commercial recreation opportunities like a waterpark or mini golf.
- **Preference for a more programmed waterfront:** Suggestions include pop-up markets, concerts and art installations.

*“We need more food options, more waterfront restaurants, boardwalk vendors, something to bring people down there! We have an untapped opportunity...We need to embrace what draws us to this city, it’s the St Mary’s River, and we need to celebrate what makes this community so unique, having access to the three largest great lakes! Tourism should be bopping downtown from spring to the end of fall. **Build it and they will come.**”*

*“Most people go downtown generally for one reason; get in, get out and shop elsewhere. What would make the downtown waterfront more inviting is the **opportunity to attend events, shop, enjoy restaurants, bars, time with friends and family and feel safe doing so.**”*

What are some other waterfronts around the world you think Sault Ste. Marie could learn from? What do you love about them?

Participants’ favourite waterfronts, and the elements they appreciate, are listed below. In general, participants wish to see highly programmed waterfronts, with plenty of retail opportunities, where they can spend time in and along the water.

Soo residents feel that we do not need to look very far to find great examples of vibrant waterfronts, with Sault Ste. Marie, MI listed as an excellent example of what to strive for within similar local contexts. Traverse City and Petoskey, MI were frequently mentioned as destinations with plenty of things to do (e.g., restaurants, shops, activities). The Toronto waterfront was mentioned most often, with emphasis on the beaches where people can swim, play volleyball, and participate in other active recreation opportunities.

Participants are seeking a waterfront experience that draws in tourism and commercial activity, and appear to be willing to pay for additional amenities and activities (e.g., mini putt, water park, kayak rentals) should they be available.

Toronto, ON: beaches, swimming, dining, sports, ferries

Sault Ste. Marie, MI: swimming, green space, dining, activities, historic

Traverse City, MI: lots to do, beaches, access to water,

Petoskey, MI: dining, cycling, pedestrianized, entertainment

Halifax, NS: shops, pier, pedestrianized, historic

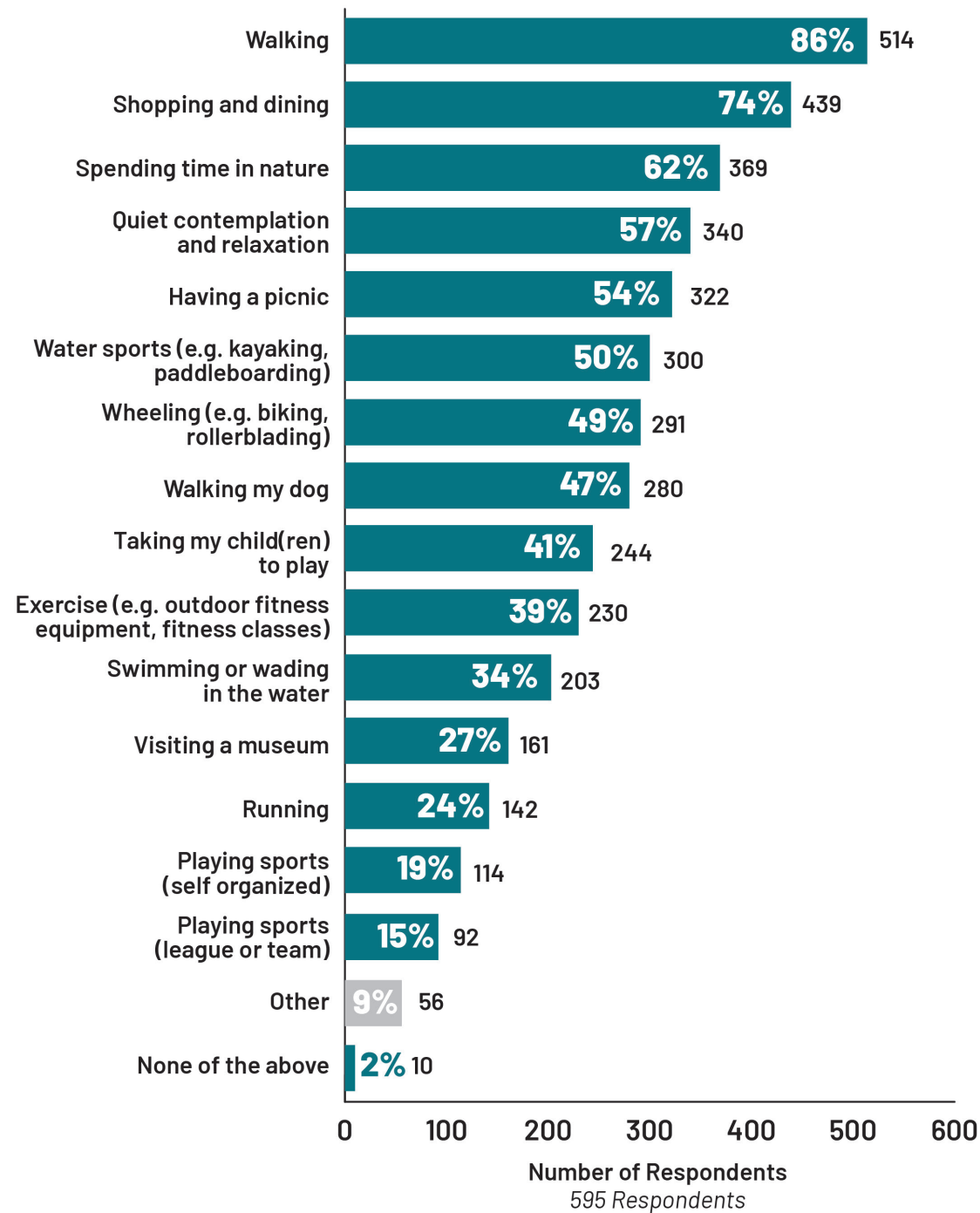
Chicago, IL: cruises, boat and bike rentals, sports, entertainment

Barrie, ON: pedestrianized, festivals, entertainment, art

Additional waterfronts (10+ mentions): Charlevoix, MI; Thunder Bay, ON; Vancouver, BC; Victoria, BC; Duluth, MN; Hamilton, ON.

Activities

Which of the following activities would you like to participate in when you visit Sault Ste. Marie's Waterfront?



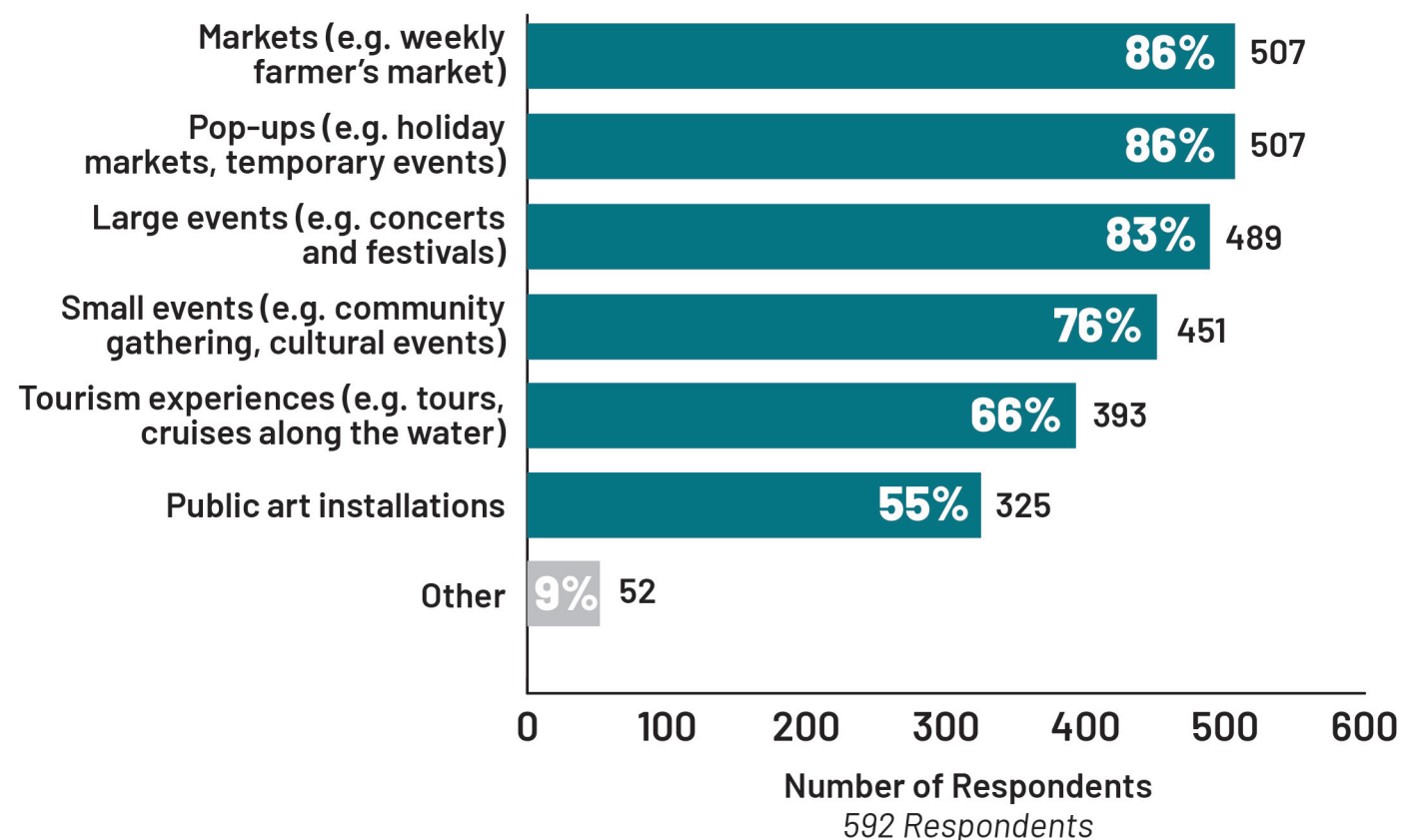
Some activities that people wish to participate in are not common at Sault Ste. Marie's current waterfront. **Shopping and dining** was requested by **74%** of respondents, but is not currently a feature of the waterfront.

Respondents would like to do more of the following activities:

- + **Spend time in nature:** 35% currently do this, 62% would like to.
- + **Quiet contemplation and relaxation:** 37% currently do this, 57% would like to.
- + **Have a picnic:** 16% currently do this, 54% would like to.
- + **Water sports:** 13% currently do this, 50% would like to.
- + **Wheeling:** 29% currently do this, 49% would like to.

Events and Programming

Which of the following events and programming would you like to participate in when you visit Sault Ste. Marie's Waterfront?



- Respondents would like to attend a variety of events and programming along the waterfront, including **markets (86%), pop-ups (86%)** and **large events (83%)**.
- Although other response options were selected less frequently, more than 50% of respondents would like to participate in any of these event and programming types along the Sault Ste. Marie waterfront.

