



# Water Trail Master Plan for Baltimore Harbor

## OVERVIEW

*August 2023*

# BALTIMORE BLUEWAY





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





## INTRODUCTION

Recreation is coming back to the waters of Baltimore. The Baltimore Blueway, a network of water trails and public access points for non-motorized craft, will connect cultural, historic, and natural sites throughout the Baltimore waterfront and promote an exciting new way to experience our city.

Imagine yourself gliding alongside historic ships, seeing the skyline from the water, paddling up to historic Fort McHenry, getting a selfie with Mr. Trash Wheel, or immersing yourself in nature, surrounded by wetlands and wildlife. Nowhere else in the Chesapeake Bay can you find such a diverse range of awe-inspiring paddling experiences within a 3-mile radius. By combining the marketing power of these attractions with outdoor recreation, the Baltimore Blueway will spur tourism and revitalization, bring together communities, and promote healthy lifestyles.

The Baltimore Blueway will also provide communities that have been disproportionately impacted by physical, social, and economic barriers with improved recreational water access and return a once highly polluted urban waterway to the residents whose tax dollars have funded its restoration.



### What is a Blueway?

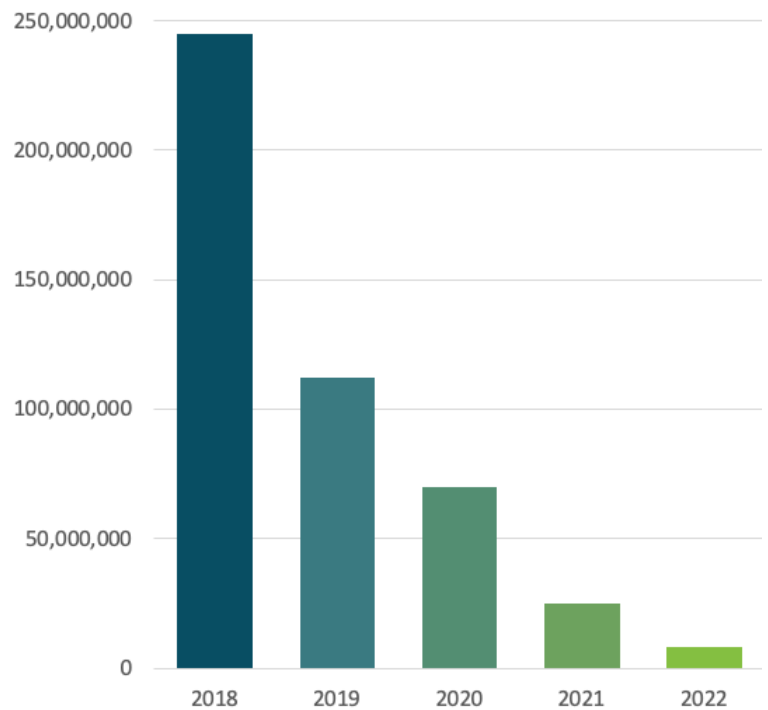
A Blueway is a designated route, or series of routes, that is primarily designed for small, non-motorized watercraft, such as kayaks, canoes, row boats, and stand-up paddleboards. Blueways are also called water trails or paddle trails and have well-defined public launch sites, also known as access points.

## Why Now?

For over fifty years, leaking sewers and industrial pollution have made water quality in Baltimore's harbor a recognized risk. However, thanks to a coordinated effort led by government, nonprofit, and business leaders, under the banner of the Waterfront Partnership's Healthy Harbor Initiative, the water is significantly cleaner today than it has been for a generation. Since 2018, there has been a 97% reduction in overflows from Baltimore's sanitary sewer system in our streams and harbor, which has dramatically impacted the health of our waterways. Yet despite these improvements, physical and perceived barriers persist in the form of vertical bulkheads and industrial development that make the shore intimidating or difficult to reach.

Improving residents' access to the water will allow them to engage with the natural resources of the Harbor and develop a more intimate relationship with the ecology of the Chesapeake Bay. Better access provides more opportunity for fun, lowers stress, facilitates community, and fosters a sense of stewardship for the environment. A critical component of the Baltimore Blueway's success will be to create a waterfront that is accessible across neighborhoods. This includes improving existing public access and adding new public access in both the Inner Harbor and the Middle Branch as well as targeting communication to increase awareness of waterfront access locations while providing free or low-cost access to kayaks, life jackets, and paddle programs.

Gallons of Sewage Overflows in Baltimore City



Source: Maryland Department of the Environment





## PLANNING PROCESS

This Plan is a culmination of a year-long project that included desktop and field analyses and stakeholder input to characterize existing and potential access points and rest stops and recommend a series of water trails.

Community input was obtained through a Project Advisory Team and solicitation of feedback from the public. Input from the public was first obtained via a web-based survey (available in both English and Spanish). A public meeting was also held in March 2023.



### Baltimore Blueway Vision

The Baltimore Blueway Plan envisions a network of water trails and access points connecting Baltimore's Inner Harbor and Middle Branch that provides accessibility for diverse communities; is a realization of the Healthy Harbor Initiative; connects to regional trails; and enhances economic activity.



## THE BALTIMORE BLUEWAY

The interconnected access points and rest stops of the Baltimore Blueway weave throughout the Inner Harbor and Middle Branch. These sites span a range of settings and conditions and are connected by trails planned for a variety of experiences from the urban energy of the Inner Harbor to wildlife viewing along the Patapsco River. The trails serve a variety of skill levels from Beginner to Advanced, depending on distance and water conditions (e.g., exposure to wind and waves).

### Always Wear a Life Jacket

Always wear a life jacket when paddling the Baltimore Blueway. This applies to everyone regardless of experience, age, or fitness. No paddler can account for every variable on the water, and the life jacket can save your life even in worst case scenarios. Make sure your life jacket is certified and fitting properly before every launch.



There is an active paddling community in the Baltimore region. The Baltimore Blueway reflects the knowledge and experience of local paddlers and recommends the safest routes given what is known about boat traffic and water conditions. The Baltimore Blueway's trails encourage paddlers to stay close to shore, avoid known shallow areas, and minimize channel crossings.



### Working Waterfront

The Baltimore Harbor is a working waterfront. While all users should “share the road,” paddlecraft are small and slow compared to other vessels. Even boats that may appear distant can approach faster than expected. While using the Blueway, paddle near the shoreline whenever possible, avoid the shipping channel, and be on the lookout for cargo ships, water taxis, recreational boats, cruise ships, and other vessels.





**ACCESS POINTS**

- Current Access Point
- Proposed Access Point
- Proposed Rest Stop

**TRAILS**

**BEGINNER**

- Inner Harbor Loop
- Middle Branch Loop
- Non-Tidal Patapsco River Trail

**INTERMEDIATE**

- North Shore Trail
- South Shore Trail
- Baltimore Peninsula Trail
- Masonville Cove Trail

**ADVANCED**

- Fort McHenry Crossing

Exercise caution when crossing the shipping channel





## INNER HARBOR BLUEWAY TRAILS

### 1. Inner Harbor Loop

**Distance:** A 2-2.5 mile loop that currently must be accessed by other trails.

**Skill:** Currently Intermediate, but would become a Beginner route with additional access points.

**Description:** The Inner Harbor Loop takes paddlers on a perimeter paddle around Baltimore's iconic Inner Harbor. In addition to getting a waterfront view of the City's majestic skyline, paddlers will see historic ships including the USS Constellation, view iconic Baltimore landmarks like the National Aquarium, and get up close to innovative environmental projects like Mr. Trash Wheel. The addition of an Inner Harbor kayak launch and rest stops at points of interest would allow paddlers to shop, dine, and visit all the Inner Harbor has to offer.

**Proposed Enhancements:** The Inner Harbor Loop currently has no access points. Paddlers must either use the North or South Shore Trails. It is recommended that a public kayak launch at Rash Field be placed near the Harbor Marina Garage to allow paddlers to load/unload equipment and park on site. It is also recommended that 1-3 rest stops be provided at points of interest so that paddlers can stretch their legs, grab a bite to eat, or visit an attraction. Branded wayfinding signage should be added to all access points along the trail.



*Inner Harbor Loop*



## 2. Inner Harbor North Shore Trail

**Distance:** 2 miles

**Skill:** Intermediate

**Description:** The Inner Harbor North Shore Trail takes users on a perimeter paddle along the north shore of the Northwest Branch from Canton Waterfront Park to the Inner Harbor. New access points would allow paddlers to shop and dine in historic Fells Point, learn about African American maritime history at the Frederick Douglass-Isaac Myers Maritime Park, or check out what is happening in Baltimore's newest neighborhood, Harbor Point.

**Proposed Enhancements:** The Inner Harbor North Shore Trail can currently be accessed by Canton Waterfront Park or Boston Street Pier. The trail would benefit from improvements to the access points as well as additional public access points in the Fells Point and Harbor Point neighborhoods. Branded wayfinding signage should be added to all access points along the trail.



*Inner Harbor North Shore Trail*



### 3. Inner Harbor South Shore Trail

**Distance:** 1.8 miles

**Skill:** Intermediate

**Description:** The Inner Harbor South Shore Trail takes paddlers on a perimeter paddle along the south shore of the Northwest Branch from Fort McHenry to the Inner Harbor. Along the way, users may see sailors honing their skills at the Downtown Sailing Center or raw sugar being unloaded beneath the iconic Domino Sugar sign. With new access points, users could visit the Baltimore Museum of Industry or the Fort McHenry National Monument.

**Proposed Enhancements:** The trail can currently be accessed by Hull Street Pier, but additional amenities like a kayak launch would improve the experience. Access points should also be added at the Baltimore Museum of Industry and Fort McHenry to allow paddlers to visit these locations. Branded wayfinding signage should be added to all access points along the trail.



*Inner Harbor South Shore Trail*



#### 4. Fort McHenry Crossing

**Distance:** 2 miles (actual crossing is 0.5 miles)

**Skill:** Advanced

**Description:** The Fort McHenry Crossing provides paddlers with scenic views of historic Fort McHenry as well as the opportunity to view wildlife enjoying the nearby wetlands. This trail is also the connecting point between the Inner Harbor and Middle Branch. The crossing is recommended for experienced paddlers and was carefully selected to reduce potential vessel conflicts with the Maryland Cruise Terminal and Masonville Cove Dredge Material Containment Facility. It also provides paddlers with the shortest distance between the two sides of the shipping channel. This is the section of the Baltimore Blueway most impacted by weather. Large areas of open water mean there is a greater potential for big wind and big waves.

**Proposed Enhancements:** The recommended channel crossing should be marked with buoys and a publicly accessible kayak launch should be added to Fort McHenry to make this historic site accessible to paddlers during regular operating hours. Branded wayfinding signage should be added to all access points along the trail.



*Fort McHenry Crossing Trail*



## MIDDLE BRANCH BLUEWAY TRAILS

### 5. Middle Branch Loop

**Distance:** 2.5 miles

**Skill:** Beginner

**Description:** The Middle Branch Loop is the easiest paddling route on the Baltimore Blueway. The near total absence of powered watercraft makes this a very approachable paddle for beginners. The trail is terrific for birdwatching including bald eagles, osprey, egrets, terns, heron and more. Paddlers should be mindful of shallow areas including Ridgley's Cove located north of the Spring Garden Swing Bridge. Ridgley's Cove is not part of the Blueway because it can become extremely shallow during low tides, which could strand unsuspecting paddlers on inaccessible mud flats.

**Proposed Enhancements:** Middle Branch Park is already the best place to launch a kayak in Baltimore, but it is underutilized. Public access would be greatly improved by adding a soft beach for launching near the Broening Park boat ramp. Ridgley's Cove could be an incredibly unique paddling destination, but it needs signage warning paddlers of the dangers during low tide. Demarcation of a paddling channel in Ridgley's Cove would allow users to avoid the shallows. Branded wayfinding signage should be added to all access points along the trail.



*Middle Branch Loop*



## 6. Masonville Cove Trail

**Distance:** 2 miles to Masonville Cove (4 miles roundtrip)

**Skill:** Intermediate

**Description:** The Masonville Cove Trail takes paddlers to visit the country's first certified urban wildlife refuge. The trail can be accessed from Broening Park, Middle Branch Park, or Southwest Area Park. It connects to the Middle Branch Loop to the west and the Fort McHenry Crossing to the east. The Masonville Cove Environmental Education Center and shoreline are open to the public during regularly scheduled hours, so paddlers should check [www.masonvillecove.org](http://www.masonvillecove.org) prior to visiting. Upon arriving, all visitors are asked to please check in at the nature center.

**Proposed Enhancements:** Masonville Cove would be a terrific location for community kayak programming or rental facilities. Broening Park, home to the Middle Branch boat ramp, also has tremendous potential. It is recommended that a kayak beach launch be added to separate paddlers from motorized craft. Water access at the nearby Middle Branch Fitness and Wellness Center would also help South Baltimore residents access the Blueway. Branded wayfinding signage should be added to all access points along the trail.



*Masonville Cove Trail*

## 7. Baltimore Peninsula Trail

**Distance:** 1.5 miles

**Skill:** Intermediate

**Description:** The Baltimore Peninsula Trail is a perimeter paddle that wraps around the Baltimore Peninsula from the Sagamore Spirit Distillery to the east to Nick's Fish House to the west. In the middle of these two points sits Ferry Bar Park, a public park with a soft launch kayak beach. To avoid conflicts with the Maryland Cruise Terminal, the trail does not continue east to Fort McHenry. Recent redevelopment has created a kayak access point at the Baltimore Peninsula site. A rental company will begin operations in Summer 2023.

**Proposed Enhancements:** Formalizing a kayak beach launch at Ferry Bar Park would help paddlers use the site. Additional infrastructure at Nick's Fish House would encourage more patronage by paddlers. Branded wayfinding signage should be added to all access points along the trail.



*Baltimore Peninsula Trail*



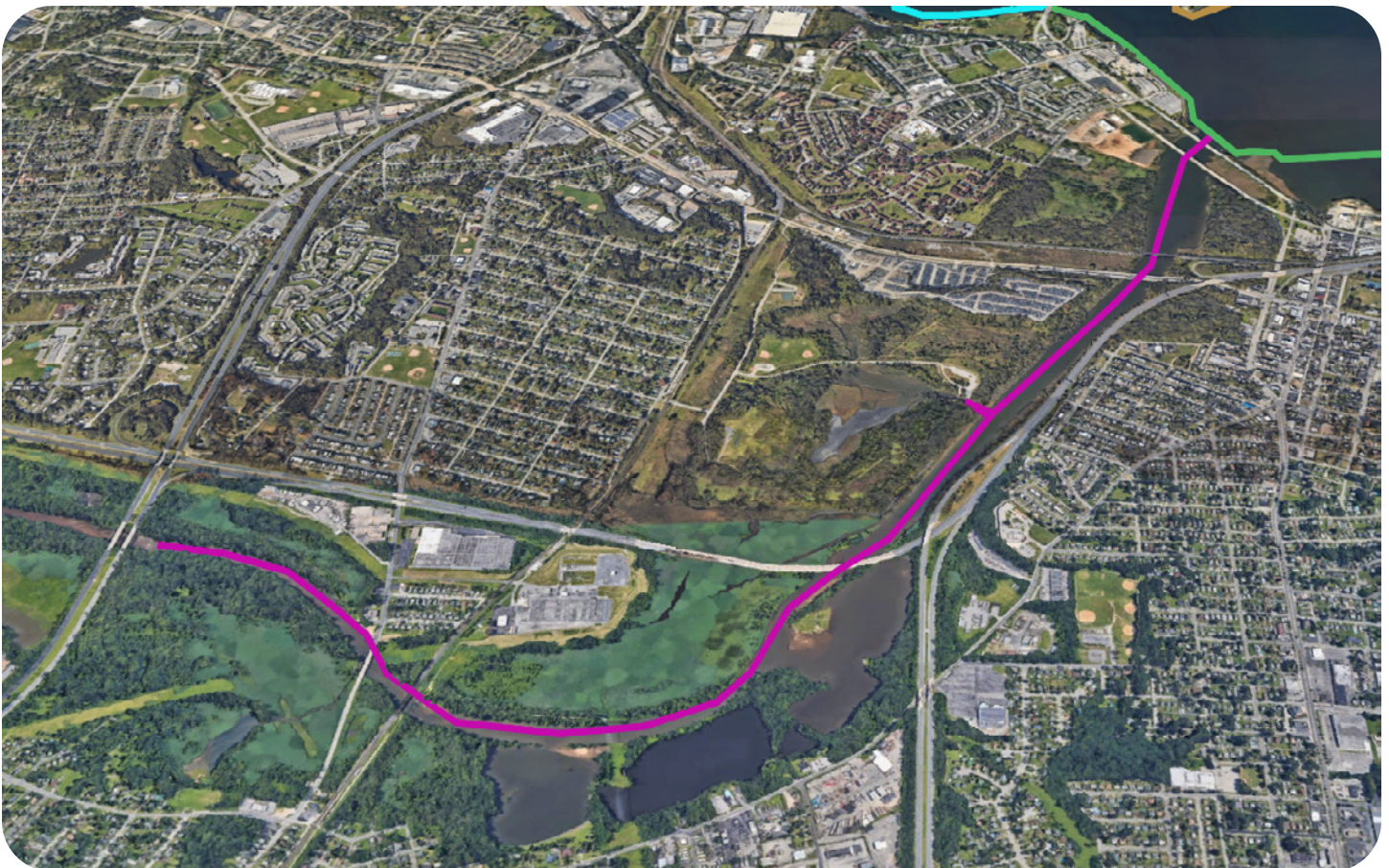
## 8. Non-Tidal Patapsco River Trail

**Distance:** The recommended trail is a six mile round trip, but users may choose to turn around at any point along the river.

**Skill:** Beginner

**Description:** The Non-Tidal Patapsco Trail includes sections of Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Anne Arundel County. Paddlers will find themselves immersed in nature while paddling beneath bridges and train trusses. Approximately 1.5 miles from the river mouth, paddlers will find extensive tidal wetlands that are home to diverse species of marine wildlife. At the mouth of the river, it is common to see people crabbing from the bridges or fishing from piers.

**Proposed Enhancements:** The Non-Tidal Patapsco Trail would benefit from improved kayak launching and signage at Baltimore County's Southwest Area Park. It is also recommended that kayak access be added to the Middle Branch Fitness and Wellness Center at Cherry Hill, which would allow the recreation center to incorporate paddle sports into programming for community residents. Branded wayfinding signage should be added to all access points along the trail.



*Non-Tidal Patapsco River Trail*



## PROJECT PRIORITIES

This plan is a snapshot of current conditions and is intended to be dynamic and adjusted as new information becomes available or opportunities arise to establish new/additional access points. For example, new shoreline development presents ideal opportunities to add new access points along the Blueway trails.

### Access Point Priorities

#### 1. Build an Inner Harbor kayak launch.

The Baltimore Blueway offers so many things to see and do, but nowhere are the attractions more exciting and in closer proximity to one another than in the Inner Harbor. In fact, there's so much to see that finding space for a kayak launch can be a challenge. The Blueway Plan has identified the promenade adjacent to Rash Field as the most suitable location due to its onsite parking and accessible loading/unloading area.

#### 2. Remodel the Middle Branch boat launch.

The Middle Branch connects the historically underserved communities of Brooklyn and Cherry Hill to the waterfront. The existing boat ramp and fishing piers located at Broening Park are in dire need of repair and replacement. It is recommended that a beach launch be added to the park to separate paddlers from motorized craft using the boat ramp.



*Photo: B'More SUP*

#### 3. Add kayak amenities to Water Taxi docks.

The Baltimore Waterfront has ten water taxi stops owned by the Baltimore City Department of Transportation. Many stops include piers and floating docks that could be adapted to accommodate paddlers. In fact, many paddlers already use water taxi stops. Just as city streets provide separate lanes for vehicles and bicycles, creating designated launching areas at water taxi stops would separate these uses while supporting multiple forms of transportation.

#### 4. Add a kayak beach to Canton Waterfront Park.

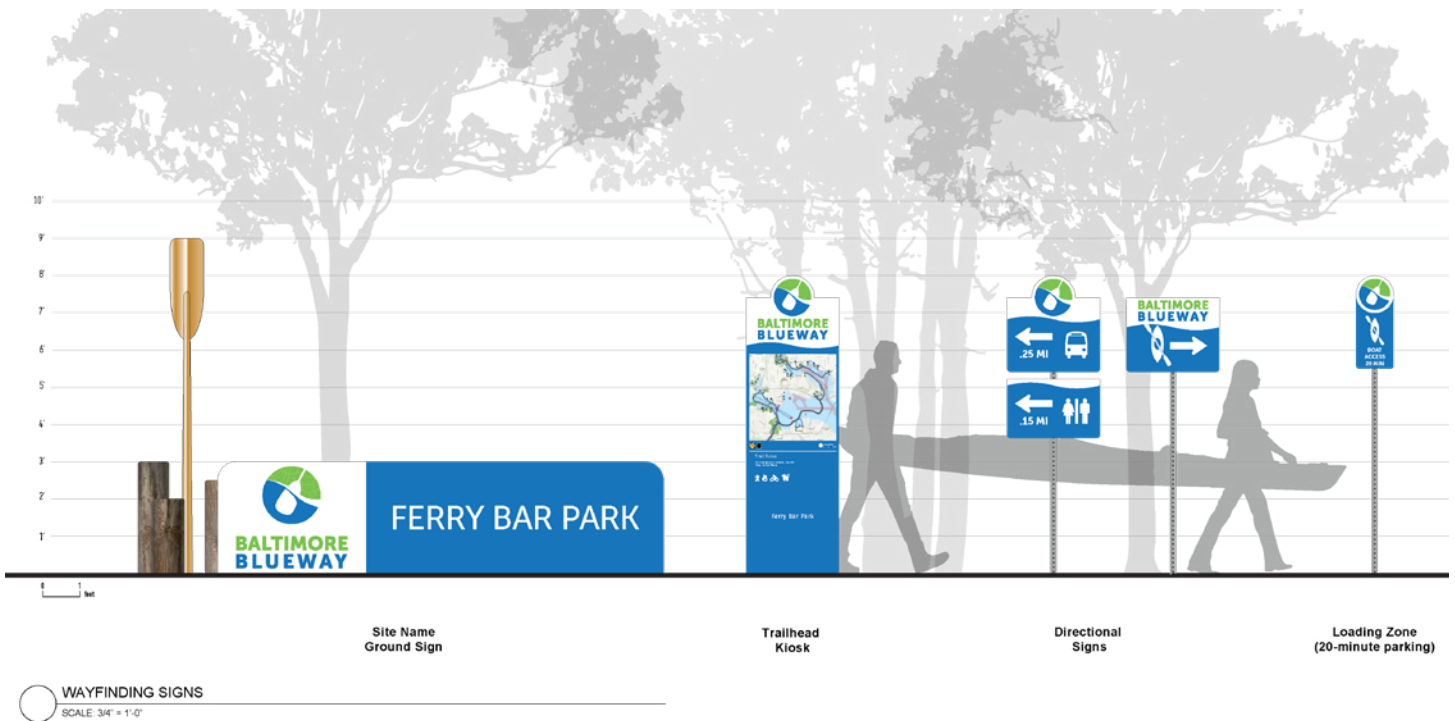
Providing a soft beach at Canton Waterfront Park would allow paddlers to more easily get on and off the water while improving safety by separating them from the motorized craft using the boat ramp.



## Marketing and Promotion Priorities

### 1. Launch a Baltimore Blueway Marketing Campaign

Use social media, a website, a public relations firm, and partnerships to spread the word far and wide about the Baltimore Blueway. Celebrate new access points and major improvements with media advisories, social media posts, and press conferences as appropriate. Develop printed collateral to be distributed to partners like VisitBaltimore, downtown hotels, community groups, paddle clubs, and other users. Host paddle events and safety trainings to promote the Blueway to new and future users.



### 2. Create a Baltimore Blueway website.

The Baltimore Blueway is an opportunity to brand and market paddling in the Baltimore Harbor while providing important safety information to paddlers. A compelling website will increase use of the Blueway by providing information about existing water trails and access points while also promoting the larger Blueway vision. The website should also provide timely updates on water conditions.

### 3. Install branded wayfinding signage at existing kayak launches.

Each access point along the Baltimore Blueway should have prominent signage installed that identifies it as part of the Blueway and provides important information to users including safety information and wayfinding instructions for the Blueway trails and nearby attractions.

## Partnership Priorities

### 1. Provide facilities for rental companies.

To ensure easy access to paddlecraft, equipment rental companies are needed. Providing basic infrastructure such as bathrooms, kayak launches, kiosks, and storage at highly trafficked areas along the waterfront will entice rental companies to locate on the Blueway.

### 2. Make Fort McHenry accessible by paddlecraft.

Fort McHenry is already one of the most popular paddle destinations in Baltimore. While it is easy to paddle around Fort McHenry, it is not currently possible to dock and visit the site. The Blueway Plan envisions Fort McHenry as the connecting point between the Baltimore Blueway and the national Chesapeake Bay water trail network, including the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail and the Star-Spangled Banner Trail. This will involve building infrastructure for launching kayaks and providing rental equipment during the park's regular operating hours.



Source: Rent.Fun



### 3. Bring paddle sports to the Middle Branch Fitness and Wellness Center.

This newly constructed recreation center in Baltimore's Cherry Hill neighborhood sits on the banks of the Patapsco River but does not currently provide access to the river. River access would help connect Cherry Hill residents to the river and the many miles of nature-filled wetlands that line its shores. The Center could also provide programming on the river to teach residents how to paddle and use the Blueway.



## CONCLUSION: Building the Blueway Together

The Baltimore Blueway will promote public access, public health, tourism, art and culture, and environmental stewardship. Bringing it to life will take vision and collaboration. The list of potential project partners presents a diverse set of significant funding and partnership opportunities that a closely coordinated regional effort could secure and leverage. Waterfront Partnership is committed to leading this effort, but it will take leadership and partnership at all levels.

Studies throughout the country show the strong economic impact that Blueways have had on visitors' spending on entertainment, accommodations, restaurants, and retail. With significant investment, the Baltimore Blueway will open the door to multiple local, regional, and federal resources that will both enhance the experience and multiply the impact of the investment. The Baltimore Blueway launches an exciting new opportunity for our city, state, and region. Together, we will bring water recreation back to the Baltimore Harbor.



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