

Diversifying Spokane's Riverfront Park



Figure 1. The Looff Carrousel inside its new building with an event room, concessions, a catering kitchen, and gift shop after cleanup (City of Spokane Parks & Recreation).

Cleanup led to innovative enhancements at the iconic downtown park on Spokane Falls

The City of Spokane used three U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Cleanup grants totaling \$600,000 to clean up soil contamination from former railway and industrial uses in Riverfront Park. The [Washington State Brownfields](https://ecology.wa.gov/Brownfields)¹ and Department of Ecology's [Voluntary Cleanup](https://ecology.wa.gov/VCP)² programs provided technical assistance for the environmental cleanup, prior to further redevelopment of the 100-acre park.

The cleanup, extensive public and Spokane Tribe of Indians involvement, and public and private funds allowed for several new park features that are connected to downtown Spokane by the new Howard Street Promenade, which included reconstruction of three bridges across the Spokane River:

- **Skate ribbon and SkyRide facility:** a 16-foot wide, 700-foot-long pathway for roller and ice skating; a ticketing office and café that serve the skate ribbon and gondola ride over the Spokane River
- **Looff Carrousel building:** a climate-controlled home for the 114-year-old wooden carrousel with an event room, concessions, a catering kitchen, and gift shop
- **Playscape:** more than 20 all-inclusive play pieces for a range of physical and social needs that support cognitive and sensory development
- **U.S. Pavilion building:** an amphitheater seating up to 5,000 visitors, an elevated central walkway, all topped by a "community lantern" featuring 479 color-changing light blades used for spectacular light shows in the evening
- **North Bank:** 4.7 acres of unpaved parking lots became the Ice Age Floods Playground, a skateboard park, basketball courts, a climbing boulder, a maintenance and operations facility, 156 new parking stalls, four family restrooms, and two picnic shelters
- **The Podium**³: new competition sports facility that merges with the park's North Bank and was completed in 2021 following cleanup of the [Carnation Dairies](https://ecology.wa.gov/CarnationDairies)⁴ site and part of Riverfront Park

¹ <https://ecology.wa.gov/Brownfields>

² <https://ecology.wa.gov/VCP>

³ <https://www.thepodiumusa.com/>

⁴ <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/cleanupsearch/site/6550>

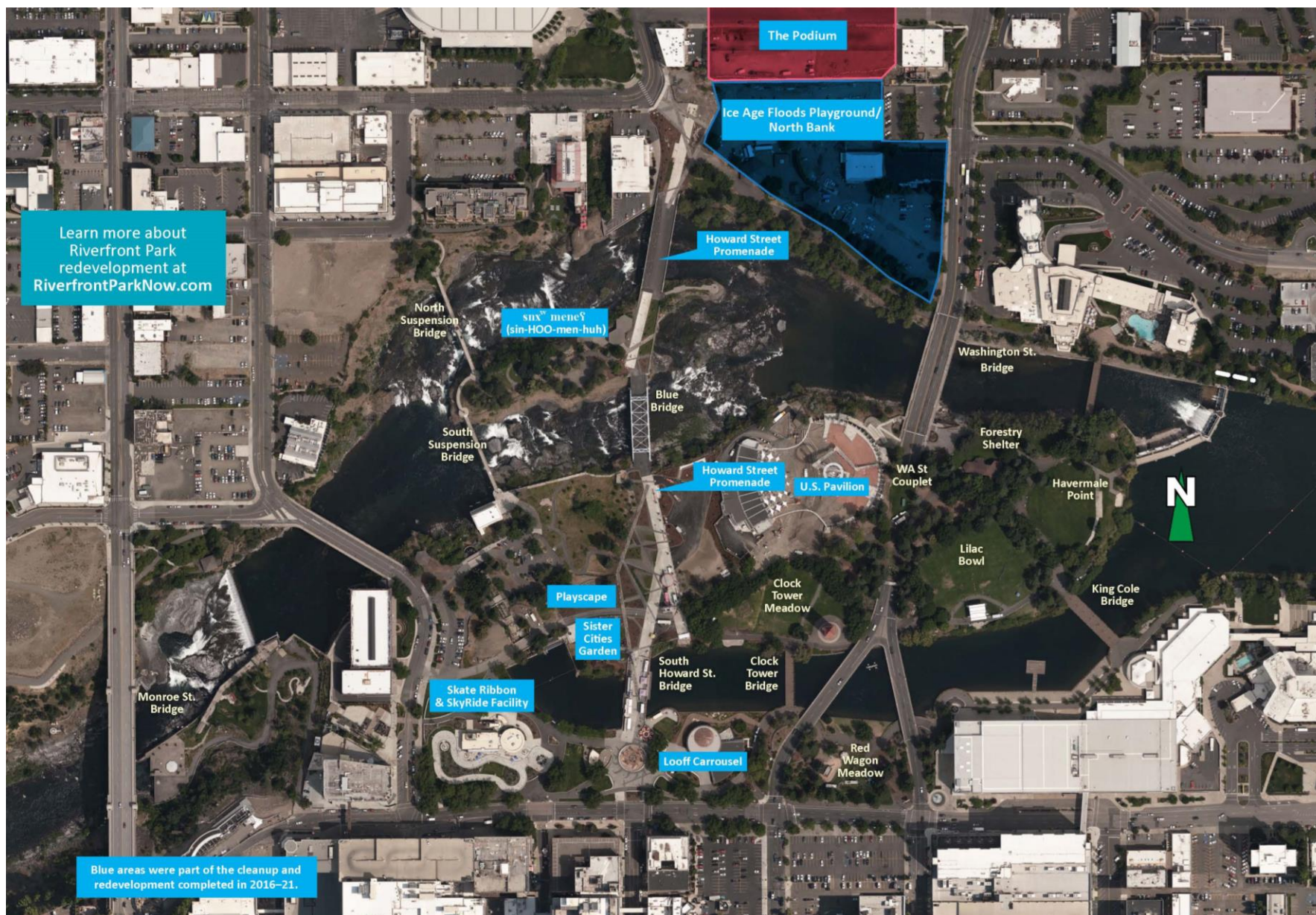


Figure 2. Riverfront Park map showing the areas that were cleaned up and redeveloped during 2016–21.

Area history

The site is centered on Spokane Falls, which for hundreds of years served as a sacred gathering place and fishing grounds for the Spokane Tribe.

Power generated by the falls, combined with the arrival in 1881 of the first of four transcontinental railroads, led to the site becoming an initial center for industrial development in Spokane, with historical uses including railyards, sawmills, flour mills, and other industrial and commercial businesses. The Great Spokane Fire swept through the area in 1889, causing destruction and leaving contaminated debris. After World War II, the industrial and commercial buildings became increasingly obsolete, and the surrounding neighborhood declined.

In 1970, the site was selected to host Expo '74—the first environmental-themed World's Fair. In 1978, the site became Riverfront Park, but as it aged, the limitations of its original design became increasingly apparent. Many of the historical areas were covered with fill during park construction, and impacts from industrial activities and the Great Fire were not investigated during construction in 1973 because current environmental laws weren't in place.



Figures 3 and 4. Top: The Riverfront Park area in 1929 during its industrial use period (*Charles Libby Collection, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture*). Bottom: Expo '74 (*WA Archives*).

Soil contaminants

The park's former industrial and commercial uses and the Great Spokane Fire contaminated soil with:

- Diesel and heavy-oil-range petroleum hydrocarbons
- Arsenic, cadmium, and lead
- Benzo(a)pyrene and carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons

While these contaminants required cleanup when disturbed, park visitors were never exposed to them because of fill material used during park construction and ground coverings such as grass and asphalt.

Cleanup

The City of Spokane launched the planning process in 2012 that led to the five-year [Riverfront Park redevelopment](https://my.spokanecity.org/riverfrontspokane/redevelopment/)⁵ completed during 2016–21. As part of the process, a soil and groundwater investigation was done in 2016 throughout areas that would be redeveloped.

The Soil Management Plan identified the following approach to dealing with contaminated soil. As soil was disturbed during redevelopment, it was sampled to determine if it was contaminated, impacted, or clean. Contaminated soil has levels of pollution that require cleanup under Washington law. Impacted soil has some contamination but not at levels requiring cleanup. Clean soil doesn't have any detectable contamination.

⁵ <https://my.spokanecity.org/riverfrontspokane/redevelopment/>

After the investigation and planning work in 2016, EPA awarded the city three [Brownfield Cleanup grants](#)⁶ totaling \$600,000 to fund cleanup. As part of the grant application process, Analysis of Brownfields Cleanup Alternative documents were completed, based on the Soil Management Plan.

Cleanup involved off-site disposal and on-site consolidation and capping of contaminated soil. Work was planned so much of the park could stay open to the public during construction, and excavations were timed so projects that could reuse soil were done following the excavations.

The North Bank was used as a temporary stockpile area for more than 20,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil and fill excavated from Havermale Island. Much of this soil was later beneficially reused to create the amphitheater inside the U.S. Pavilion. Soils were compacted and covered with 2 feet of clean soil and grass. Additional contaminated soil was capped under new parking areas, pathways, and gathering places throughout the park.

Buried remnants of former buildings and infrastructure from the site's industrial past were uncovered during construction. Along the South Bank, crews had to remove many old pilings from former railroad lines and the associated railyard. At the U.S. Pavilion, workers uncovered massive full-width turnbuckles supporting a connecting bridge that complicated installing utilities.

Ecology approved the cleanup plans, reviewed reports, and provided letters stating cleanup was complete as the project progressed throughout the three areas. The City filed an environmental covenant to document the contamination remaining under ground coverings, and Ecology issued a no further action letter, stating cleanup is complete.



Figures 5, 6, and 7. Top: Soil excavated at Havermale Island stockpiled at the North Bank for potential reuse. Middle: Building up the amphitheater space by beneficially reusing soil from Havermale Island. Bottom: Cleanup at the Loeffel Carrousel area included dismantling and reconstructing the carousel. (City of Spokane Parks & Recreation)

⁶ www.epa.gov/brownfields/brownfields-cleanup-grants

Tribal and public involvement

The redevelopment process involved many project participants, including:

- The Spokane Tribal Heritage Committee: five Spokane Tribal Council members, three park board members, and a city council member formed to spur improvements to honor the history and legacy of the Spokane Tribe. One result was the renaming of Canada Island as Snxw Mene? (pronounced “Sin-hoo-men-huh”), which is Salish for “Salmon People.”
- The Riverfront Park Advisory Committee: guided park staff and the board on proposed park goals, uses, design alternatives, financing options, community outreach, and overall scope of work related to the development of Riverfront Park.
- The local community: the multi-year public outreach process included over 75 public meetings with neighborhood councils, community stakeholders, and interest groups. These meetings culminated in the Riverfront Park Master Plan adopted in 2014.
- The Accessibility Workgroup: represented people with varied physical abilities, profoundly influencing the park’s design by providing universal experiences with powerful sensory moments that are often denied to less-abled users in standard designs.

An award-winning project

At the national Brownfields 2022 Conference in Oklahoma City, the Riverfront Park cleanup and redevelopment won a Phoenix Award for brownfields excellence. The project was recognized for transforming multiple parking lots and functionally obsolete buildings designed to serve the 6-month temporary Expo ’74 into a renewed community gathering space and activity center that now fully leverages the site’s extraordinary natural setting on Spokane Falls and location at Spokane’s historic center.



Figures 8, 9, and 10. Top: Park patrons enjoy an evening light show at an event in the U.S. Pavilion. Middle: The skate ribbon. Bottom: U.S. Pavilion with the Howard St. Promenade and Looff Carrousel in the background. (*City of Spokane Parks & Recreation*)

Redevelopment as a catalyst for nearby community improvements

Since starting the park redevelopment, three private developments were proposed next to Riverfront Park:

- The Papillon: new 6- and 12-story mixed-use towers (south tower completed 2022, north tower in planning)
- The Falls Tower: 22-story mixed use tower (in planning)
- [The M Apartments](https://www.themapartments.com/)⁷: adaptive reuse project with 118 apartments, retail, and restaurants (completed in 2018)

Riverfront Park redevelopment by the numbers

Accomplishment	Amount
EPA Brownfield Cleanup grants	\$600,000
Public funding	\$64 million
Private investments	\$11 million
Contaminated soil disposed	About 6,150 tons
Contaminated soil beneficially reused and capped onsite	25,500 cubic yards
Land remediated and redeveloped	About 20 acres
Jobs created during construction	160 laborers and tradesman supervised by 5 general contractors and many subcontractors
2022 attendance	An estimated 3 million visitors, making it the #1 tourist attraction in Spokane
2022 events	364 events, many of which were free or low-cost community engagement activities
Spokane Riverfront Park Facebook followers	More than 37,500
Phoenix Award for brownfields excellence	Project award at Brownfields 2022 Conference

Related Information

- Ecology cleanup site name: [Riverfront Park](#)⁸
- Property address: 507 N. Howard St., Spokane
- Ecology Cleanup Site ID: 13026
- ACRES IDs: 237790 | 237785 | 237783



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To request an ADA accommodation, contact Ecology by phone at 360-407-6831 or email at ecyadacoordinator@ecy.wa.gov, or visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>. For Relay Service or TTY call 711 or 877-833-6341

⁷ <https://www.themapartments.com/>

⁸ <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/cleanupsearch/site/13026>