



River Ecology & Governance Task Force

June 11, 2024 3:00 PM – 4:30 PM

Agenda

1. Task Force Short-term Objectives and Short-term Goals
2. River Edge Access Study Update
3. Rivers Assets Working Group Discussion
4. Update: Working Groups and Government Partner Projects
5. Adjourn and Upcoming Task Force Meeting Dates

Task Force Objectives

Transforming Chicago's unique waterway system into a **thriving and ecologically integrated natural asset**, capable of accommodating the needs of people, requires **coordinated planning**, investment and management.

Aspire to, and realize no later than 2040, inland waterways in Chicago that are **inviting, productive and living**, that **support wildlife in-stream and on their banks**, and that **contribute to our city's resiliency**

Task Force Work Plan for 2024

Goal #1: Review current polices and create recommendations to strengthen them

Goal #2: Inform near-term planning opportunities to advance collective priorities

Goal #3: Develop criteria to prioritize projects for identified funding opportunities

Goal #4: Ensure process for development reviews is followed and continues to improve new riverfront developments

CHICAGO RIVER EDGE ACCESS STUDY

RIVER ECOLOGY & GOVERNANCE TASK FORCE MEETING

June 2024



NEXT STEPS

- Finalize Draft
- Tool Launch
- Continue Updates and Improvements

QUESTIONS?

River Asset Working Group

Goal: To kick off a discussion to understand the feasibility of creating a more clearly defined structure to maintain, enhance, and oversee expansion of riverfront open spaces, trails, parks, ecosystem restorations, and other assets in the City of Chicago.



Kick Off Meeting: April 29th

We will explore:

1. The challenges that river assets are facing today (maintenance, funding, permitting)
2. Case studies for how different public, private, and quasi-public spaces are managed and maintained today (what is working, what isn't?)
3. Create a work plan to explore restructuring the governance of existing and future river edge spaces

A Rapidly Changing Riverfront

- Approx. **88%** of riverfront parcels are privately owned
- Approx. **37** miles of naturally sloped river edges within the City of Chicago
- **18** waterway access points
- Approx. a **100** miles of river edges



Diverse Existing River Edge Assets – Some Aging

Community Gardens



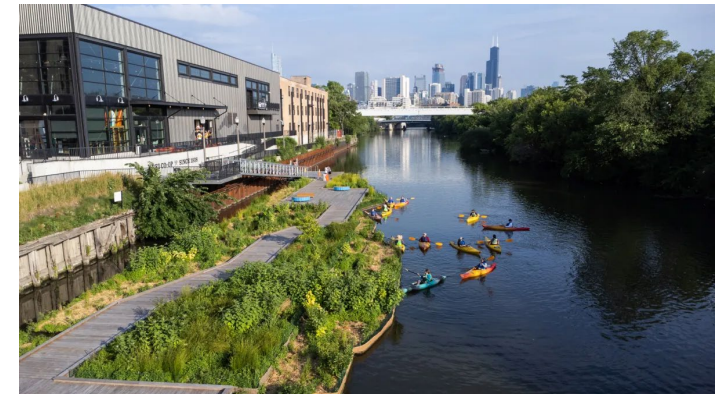
Quasi-Public Parks



Water Recreational Assets

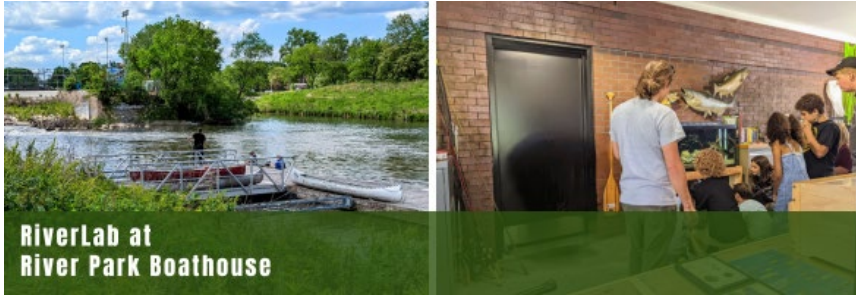


Floating Wetlands



Diverse Existing River Edge Assets – Some Aging

Educational Spaces



Trails/Greenways



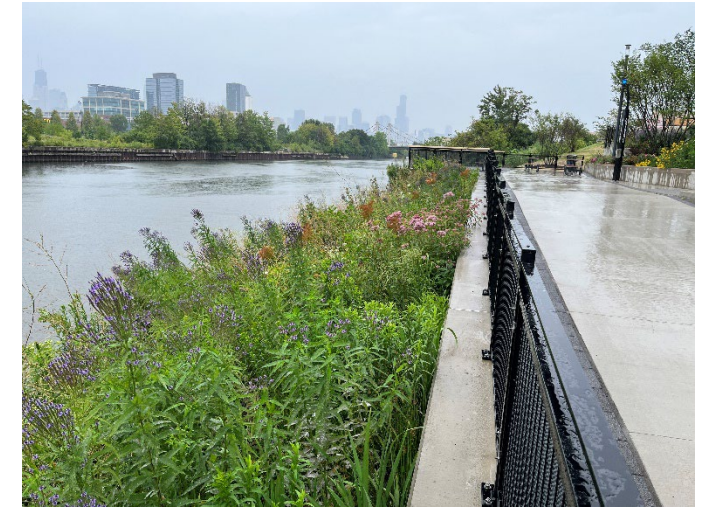
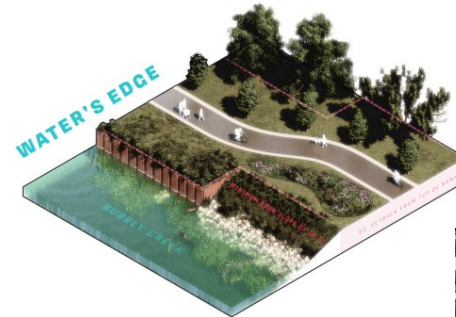
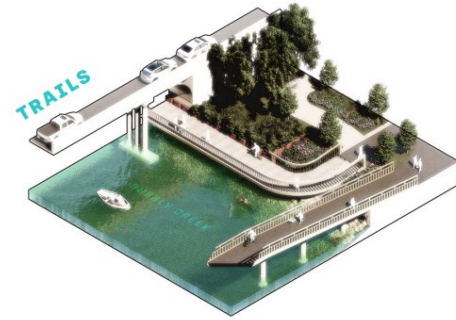
Habitats/Natural Areas



Public Parks



New River Assets in Development



River Assets Working Group – Break Out Discussion

What are challenges that organizations are facing with creating and managing river assets?

What needs will existing and future river spaces have as they age?

Who is responsible today for addressing these needs and how well is this working?

How can an entity/structure address the issues identified? What roles, responsibilities, and purpose would it have?

What are challenges that organizations are facing with creating and managing river assets?

Lack of ownership clarity / unique ownership conditions

“Many organizations and jurisdictions, would help to have clarity of ownership responsibilities”

Intergovernmental coordination

“Every project takes so much time/resources e.g. intergovernmental agreements required for each bridge.”

Maintenance

“Need for funding for maintenance and clearly defined agency/organization for maintenance of spaces”

“Need for enhanced protection of natural areas and a willingness to regulate polluted run-off, we need more thinking to the impact beyond sites”

Dependence on volunteers

“Too much dependence on local advocates for long term maintenance of sites”

Planning

“Identifying best uses of spaces holistically, encourage bigger river investments that are more creative and impactful”

Agency Staff Turnover

“High staff turnover i.e. loss of institutional knowledge to continue projects and initiatives through all phases”

Private / Public Coordination

“Coordinated public/private investment for river edge and access and trail development”

Lack of clear plan for further land protection / acquisition

“Land ownership, acquisitions for more protected open spaces along the river system”

Complex Permitting

“Complex permit environment. Can be challenging and time consuming for new organizations, small business, and community groups to permit innovative river projects”

Funding / \$\$\$

“Public funding for capital river investments”

River Assets Working Group – What We Heard

What needs will existing and future river spaces have as they age?

Updating codes/guidelines

“Address updated codes/guidelines as substantial renovations are completed”

“How to apply updated regulations to aging sites as conditions change (like spikes in water). Plans need to be revisited with changing needs.”

Designing/Updating Infrastructure with Natural Systems

“Replacement of seawall structures with more ecologically environmentally friendly structures – that are more resilient”

“With increasing water levels and erosion – there is a need for bank restoration strategized that are naturalized but still provide armored conditions to retain the investments

Connectivity

“As amenities/assets grow, connections need to be made for cohesive and continuous corridors for all users (wildlife included)”

Enforcement

“Clearly defined roles for enforcing river related regulations and requirements”

“How do we incorporate flexibility into the future regulations, to adjust for emerging challenges and opportunities with rivers work.”

Technical Knowledge

“Technical expertise to be shared with those that maintain river assets”

Programming

“Fix things that break and provide consistent programming and access”

Maintenance - Stewardship support

“Maintenance/upkeep of naturalized plantings along the river edge”

Money - Capital improvements

“Long term capital improvements”

River Assets Working Group – What We Heard

Who is responsible today for addressing these needs and how well is this working?

Complex / “It’s complicated” “It depends”

“Too many groups are responsible - which doesn’t work well. Hard for gov’t to navigate; impossible for general public.”

“We have very high expectations for river edge sites, expecting them to play many roles, be everything for everyone. Need to think about strategies that are site appropriate.

Leases – different from ownership

“There are owners and leases. Leases have maintenance obligations in many instances, they could use assistance achieving maintenance goal, in better ways.”

Overdependence on Stewardship

“River assets that depend only on community stewardship models can be risky, they need further formalization to sustain assets regardless of availability of volunteers”

Each case is unique - Multi-jurisdictional

“Confusing and overlapping responsibilities is a problem across the river system.”

“Development of new sites increase access not as proactive as it could be. There are multiple efforts but piecemeal.”

Private Ownership

“For private developments – maintenance and access works pretty well based on the PD process, but as you move away from density/activity you get more gaps and spaces that don’t connect.”

River Assets Working Group – What We Heard

How can an entity/structure address the issues identified? What roles, responsibilities, and purpose would it have?

“Clearing house to **coordinate** between partners.”

“Setting and **enforcing** regulations; Helping people understand them. Reviewing development proposals, consolidated functions: permitting, marketing, etc.”

“**Consistency** of maintenance, enforcement, cross jurisdictional-ownership coordination, funding/capital improvements/management/permitting”

“Sustained **funding** for staff time related to rivers work”

“Specific focus on river investments, like a department contact, would be complicated but useful”

“**Funding** for maintenance/restore trails. Coordinating with other Depts/Orgs ensuring vision is being implemented.

“An entity could: ensure that property owners are meeting established standards for property type, serve as a **clearing-house for funding**, provide **technical assistance** to property owners, **coordinate** planning efforts, create messaging for general public, direct questions from public & property owners to the correct government agency, **promote connectivity**.”

“An assigned government agency **champion/point person** for river projects, plans, programming, and asset management.”

“Agencies need to give up power to allow others to **regulate**.”

River Assets Working Group – What We Heard

Breakout Discussion Questions

What is missing from what we heard?

What do you think should be prioritized?

How does this resonate with your experience on river-related projects?

River Assets Working Group – What We Heard

System Plans Working Group, 2024 Work Plan Goals: Improving River Edge Access

1. Discuss challenges and successes to the current state of river edge access.
2. Use discussion outcomes to inform near-term planning opportunities to advance collective priorities.
 - CDOT: River Edge Access Study
 - DPD: Calumet Design Guidelines and Land Use Update
3. Review other river edge access policies and identify opportunities to strengthen them in future plans and projects.

System Plans Working Group Update

- May 22nd Discussion Topic: Chicago River Edge Property Land Ownership Conditions

Example Chicago River Edge Ownership Today



Private property with public access agreement (setback zone)



Public or private property with MWRD jurisdiction over the river edge zone



Parks / Forest Preserves leased from MWRD



Intermediary land trust owner for capital improvement with long term agency commitment



DOT property owned with other agency jurisdiction agreements



Access easements / infrastructure / utilities



Permitted access on local or federal public property

System Plans Working Group Update

- Key Themes:
 - Many sites have multiple overlapping owners and easements, such as utilities, transportation organizations, etc.
 - Participants who are working on river edge access planning shared challenges on working with railroads and utility organizations because they are large and complex entities.
 - Participants shared past challenges with leasing property for public access because sometimes there is a disconnect between on-the-ground management of the site and what was agreed upon.
 - Many sites along the rivers are brownfields which offers opportunities and challenges because of the responsibility that comes with ownership
 - Many organizations are involved in the cleanup and redevelopment of these sites including the City's Local Industrial Retention Initiative (LIRI). Working with these types of organizations and others will be part of exploring future uses along the river.

Development Review Working Group Update

- No new reviews yet in 2024
- Costco (Task Force review in 2022) went to the April Plan Commission.
- The development team highlighted our Task Force comments and adjustments they are making:
 - Dark sky lighting
 - Landscape maintenance plan
 - Additional river signage/wayfinding
 - Improved connections from the street to the river edge path

Development Review Working Group Update

- Internally tracking our REGTF reviewed Waterway PDs

REGTF Development Review Tracking									
Link to the City's Development Review Working Group Webpage									
Date	Presenter	Task Force Presentation	Design Guidelines Checklist	PD Key Points	Key Working Group Comments	Additional Community Comments	Comment Letter Link	Developer Response/Comments	Adjustments to Design/PD
	Michael Ezgur, Z	https://www.chicagoc.gov			Filter runoff using nature-based stormwater solutions before it enters the Calumet River, ensure that new landscape and trees succeed by preparing soil and understanding potentially contaminated run-off from neighboring uses, plan for a diverse planting palette of native plants, trees, and shrubs and a maintenance plan to support their growth.	-	Comment Letter		
	Sam Luckino, Arc	https://www.chicagoc.gov		Kept seating pockets by river edge. Phase 1 does not finish riverwalk and leaves a dead end. River access points for phase 1 seem to be through the two garage entry points? Concrete and asphalt pavement for parking/hardscape. Lots of active programming with a stage for the amphitheater and other commercial space.	Stormwater approach questions and comments on encouraging NBS, collecting litter, filtration before runoff reaches the river. Balance between active and passive riverfront uses. Better circulation and access throughout all stages of the development, not only an elevator access point.	Local neighborhood-based organizations representing River North, Near North, and River West: Concerns about high density area of development, traffic concerns, pedestrian and bike safety concerns, and noise disturbance concerns.	Comment Letter		
		https://www.chicagoc.gov			Exceed Calumet Design Guidelines to create pedestrian connectivity and public riverfront access, improve stormwater management to limit runoff, prioritize water quality in materials usage and site maintenance, and ensure that there is a robust planting plan.	-	Comment Letter		
8/2024		https://www.chicagoc.gov	https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dcd/River_Ecolo		Use alternative solution to comply with River Design Guidelines 30' setback requirement, review the planting plan to maximize native species, and balance shading/screening with high value natural habitat, improve circulation and signage to maximize accessibility for both Costco shoppers, employees, and the general public.	-	Comment Letter	Mentioned Task Force in CPC presentation, incorporating a landscape maintenance plan and dark scale lighting per our comments.	Added river edge signage, connections from street to river edge path
		https://www.chicagoc.gov			Place the barge loading facility on the main canal rather than the Collateral Channel, provide additional information and documentation on air quality impact, proactively engage around dredging and remediation practices, ensure that there is a robust planting plan for the site, consider installing riverfront conservation setbacks where bare access is not needed.	-	Comment Letter		

Project Updates

- **Chicago Dept. of Planning and Development**

- Wrapped up the public comment period for the Sustainable Development Policy on May 15. Target for initial implementation is July 1.
- Calumet Design Guidelines and Land Use Update officially launched with a notice to proceed issued. After internal kick-off with consultant team, which is lead by Muse, could potentially discuss this project in more depth at a future Task Force meeting.

- **Chicago Dept. of Transportation**

- Near-completion of planning tool to be used internally, by government partners, and other stakeholders as part of the River Edge Access Study.
- Phase I engagement for Weber Spur kicked-off in June.
- Chicago Ave. bridge over the River: currently in design. Construction will start Q4 2024
- Division St. bridge over the Canal: currently in design. Construction will start Q1 2025
- Division St. bridge over the River: currently in design. Construction will start Q1 2025

- **Chicago Dept. of the Environment and Dept. of Public Health**

- Wrapping up internal review for Cumulative Impacts ordinance language. Next steps include engaging the Environmental Equity Working Group.

Project Updates

- **Chicago Park District**

- Restoration and maintenance work at Ronan, River, Legion, and Kiwanis parks continue. River Park Floating Islands installed.
- RiverLab program registration is now open via Chicago Park District website along with drop-in activities and open paddling access.
- Adaptive paddling infrastructure at River Park coming soon.
- Public fishing at the Jetty 6 hrs/day Thurs-Sunday through September.
- Creation of new natural areas along Bubbly Creek at Canal Origins, Canalport Riverwalk and Park No. 571.

- **Forest Preserve District of Cook County**

- Beaubien Woods: construction of the boat launch and other improvements are underway. Once the launch is completed, volunteers will be recruited to help maintain the launch as part of the African American Heritage Water Trail. Also underway is the Beaubien Woods Youth Outdoor Ambassadors program, a five-week summer job program for teens in the Altgeld Gardens community, run in collaboration with Friends of the Forest Preserves, FPCC, and Openlands. Participants are trained in and conduct public/environmental education, habitat restoration, and community engagement activities while gaining exposure to the forest preserves and jobs in conservation.
- The Caldwell Woods' Gateway to Nature Plan includes a new wellness center to be opened in the summer along the North Branch bike trail.

- **Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago**

- Ambient biological monitoring will be ongoing during the summer.

2024 Task Force Meeting Dates

Quarterly Meetings: 3:00 – 4:30 pm

- September 17th
- December 3rd

System Plans Working Group: 12:00 – 1:00 pm

- August 21st
- November 13th