

River Ecology and Governance Task Force

09/17/24 | 3pm to 4:30pm

MEETING MINUTES

Welcome and Introductions

The meeting began at 3pm with participants introducing themselves in the chat. Approximately 40 members of the Task Force attended the meeting.

Task Force Objectives and Goals

The group began with a review of the Task Force objectives and the broader role of the Task Force. The Task Force focuses on transforming the waterway system into a thriving and ecologically integrated natural asset through coordinated planning, investment, and management. The goal is to have an inviting, productive, and living waterway system that contributes to the city's resiliency. The Task Force allows for coordination amongst multiple types of partners to achieve common goals, provides for dialogue on ongoing issues and challenges impacting the river system, and provides a place to share successes in advancing progress.

Task Force Work Plan for 2024

The Task Force reviewed the four work plan goals for 2024:

- **Goal #1:** Review current policies 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

Calumet Land Use and Design Guidelines Update

The Chicago Department of Planning and Development provided an update on the planning process for the Calumet Area Land Use Plan and Design Guidelines update. This is a two-year planning effort that will build on the successes of 2002 Calumet Area Land Use Plan that established new and protected areas like the Big Marsh as well as the 2004 Calumet Design Guidelines that dictated stormwater management and site design guidelines for planned developments in the vicinity of the Calumet River.

The study boundary for the land use plan update includes three industrial corridors: Burnside, Pullman, and Calumet. The plan will establish a 10 to 20-year vision for the region, to balance economic development, health and safety, and environmental goals. The plan is being updated to improve the mitigation of threats to environmental and public health from cumulative impact assessment recently done, to establish preferred future land uses based on market trends and community input, to incorporate new technologies and best practices to promote sustainability and resiliency, and to ensure industrial and other intensive uses are "good neighbors." This is part of a larger effort by the City to update land use plans across all of Chicago's industrial corridors.

The planning process timeline includes four phases. Phase I kicked off in April 2024 with an analysis of existing conditions and research of prior plans and best practices. Phase II includes drafting a land use framework and design guidelines recommendations, and Phase III will determine the preferred land use framework and guidelines to set up for Phase IV formal public comments and approval by Plan Commission. The project is currently moving from Phase I to Phase II.

Muse, the lead consultant on the project, presented the proposed engagement plan and methods. The Calumet Area Industrial Commission (CAIC) and the Calumet Connect Partnership Technical Assistance Team are advising on the community engagement strategy—providing support on engagement principles, engagement methods, language and access needs, and stipends for community participation. The engagement plan includes a mixture of focus groups, working groups, community meetings, and other types of engagement strategies, such as surveys, tabling, one-on-ones, as needed. Engagement will be part of all phases of the project.

Government Partner Projects Update

Brief project updates were provided on initiatives that government partners participating on the Task Force are advancing. These included projects ranging from the formal release of the River Edge Access Study tool, completed by the Chicago Department of Transportation, to the TIF funded projects being led by the Chicago Park District at

River Kiwanis and Legion Parks, to the Forest Preserve's reconstruction of the Des Plaines River Trail. More detail about these projects is in the Meeting Presentation.

Community Projects Updates: Calumet River and Chicago River's South Branch

- 100th Street Calumet River Project: Great Cities Institute and NeighborSpace gave an update on the 100th Street Calumet River Project. This project envisions community access to the river from 96th to 106th streets and is developing a plan for community recreation space, with phased habitat restoration, public amenities and community stewardship. The vision is to have a community managed site with community members taking the lead on eventual stewardship.

Engagement has included a participatory planning process to facilitate opportunities, site activations, and tours for the community to access a usually blocked off site. This has slowly built momentum and awareness at the community level. Three working designs have been developed and the project team is socializing the concepts with the landowners, including People's Gas and NRG Energy, to see if they can get to agreement on making the space publicly accessible. The project has also recently received a Green Latinos Grant to further advance community engagement activities, conduct site activations, continue planning and design work and engage with landowners to move the project forward.

- South Branch Connectivity Project: The McKinley Park Development Council presented the South Branch Connectivity Project, which is a vision and planning framework to create a continuous multi-use trail along the South Branch of Chicago River from the boat launch at Western Avenue to Ping Tom Memorial Park in Chinatown. The framework envisions how parcels could be connected through the development of this trail that could serve as both transportation and recreation. The process included community engagement with about 600 participants, a speaker series, working with the national park service, and cultural programming. The focus is to have a safe alternative for cyclists off Archer Avenue, better access to the Orange Line train, and opportunities for activation and community gatherings.

Different conditions and challenges across three sections of the connectivity project were shared. Some key challenges include:

- Land ownership is varied across parcels
- Zoning and land use changes are needed to advance the framework
- Engineering challenges, particularly working with railroads to coordinate
- Illinois Department of Transportation can be challenging to work with on streets that are under their authority

There has also been encouraging progress:

- Pilot project is being conducted in Chinatown to make viaducts more pedestrian friendly
- Interest in street vendor participation
- A developer has offered to pay for wayfinding signage on their property
- Concepts to improve Canal Origins Park to create a more activated park with a greater river connection

Working Groups Update

- River Assets Working Group: This working group met in July and reviewed case studies of other cities' strategies for river governance and identified key themes, roles, and responsibilities. Three out of four are led by non-profit entities that act as a bridge between sectors with a shared mission of public benefits and protection of the waterway for public use. The key takeaways included being able to leverage joint private and public funding, visioning and planning as a focus for a centralized entity, and that effective models have a clear governance structure with meaningful authority and a guiding vision.
- Systems Plans Working Group: This working group met in August and discussed the issues and challenges with water trail access, safety and functionality. Key takeaways from the conversation centered on the need to consolidate, expand and improve the tools paddlers use, better communication of water levels, hazards, and water quality conditions, expanding map resources for water trails informed by current data, and creating consistent and universal safety guides for Chicago water trail usage. This working group is

collaborating with government partners and Openlands.

- **Development Review Working Group:** This working group met in early September and reviewed the DuSable Park project via a presentation provided by the Chicago Park District. The key takeaways from the group conversation were documented and the feedback will be gathered into a collective comment letter. During the meeting there were questions about plant palette and plant selection along with a request for additional details around the stormwater management and flood mitigation plans.

Project Challenges Check-In

The Task Force was presented with a [google form](#) to help members pose river project-related questions to government partners. MPC and Friends of the Chicago River will review the questions that are submitted and direct inquiries to the right contacts. The goal is to provide space for members to bring up topics outside the quarterly Task Force meeting, incorporate these ideas and questions into future meetings, and help members receive answers more efficiently and effectively.

Adjourn and Upcoming Task Force Meeting Dates

Upcoming dates for 2024 meetings were provided to members.

Task Force:

- December 3: 3 pm to 4:30 pm

System Plans Working Group:

- November 13: 12 pm to 1 pm

Development Review Working Group:

- October 1: 6 pm to 7 pm

The meeting concluded at 4:30pm.