

# River Ecology and Governance Task Force

06/11/2024 | 3 pm to 4:30 pm

## MEETING MINUTES

### Welcome and Introductions

The meeting began at 3 pm with participants introducing themselves in the chat. Approximately 44 members of the Task Force attended the meeting. Friends of the Chicago River noted that both Friends of the Chicago River and the Metropolitan Planning Council will continue to support the City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development (DPD) in facilitating the Task Force in 2024.

### Task Force Short-term Objectives and Short-term Goals

#### Task Force Goals and Objectives

The group began with a refresher on 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.

#### 2024 Work Plan

The Task Force was reminded of 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

### River Edge Access Study Update

The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) and its consultant, AECOM, are in the process of completing the development of their planning tool. CDOT provided an update on the status of their work as well as a demonstration of how to use the tool and its features. The goal is for CDOT and other government and civic partners to be able to use the tool to identify and evaluate potential project opportunities. The tool will be finalized in the next month or two. This tool has evergreen content with update capabilities as information changes.

The tool features an Inventory section where the user can access characteristics of different parcels along the river. It includes an instruction page for orientation along with filtering and selection tools for looking at more detailed data. Characteristics include sidewalks connected to trails, trail gaps, land uses, future trail opportunities, active projects, and potential projects not currently funded, water trail and river trail access points, etc. The tool also includes an Analysis section that includes information related to environmental and planning issues, such as network connectivity, distance to transit stops, vulnerable populations, environmental justice communities, etc. A detailed methodology outlining data sources is linked.

During the tool demonstration, Task Force members had questions about the information included, which CDOT responded to in the meeting:

- What was the criteria for water access points?
  - Water access points are existing and correspond with barge usage.
- Does this include land use and/or zoning?

- The tool includes land use, not zoning.
- Did you identify superfund sites?
  - This is being added to the tool but has not been added yet because additional data is needed.
- Can we incorporate data from the Cumulative Impact Assessment?
  - Yes, this data can be included.

Task Force members were asked to reach out to Lindsey Frey at [lindsey.frey2@cityofchicago.org](mailto:lindsey.frey2@cityofchicago.org) with any additional questions.

### **River Assets Working Group Discussion**

A new working group, called the River Assets Working Group, was formed in Q2 2024. It is comprised of government and civic stakeholders meeting throughout 2024 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. This group hosted its first meeting in April and discussed four questions around the challenges and needs of organizations and riverfront spaces as well the potential for a new structure to help address the identified issues:

- 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?

The key takeaways from this meeting were reviewed with the Task Force. The Task Force then divided into small groups to discuss three 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?

A few major themes emerged from the small group conversations. They were:

- **What is missing from what we heard?**
  - Remediation is a challenge that was missing from the key takeaways.
  - Zoning and changes along the river should focus on future use, not just past use.
  - Security standards and issues
  - Liability/insurance issues around public access
  - Decentralized water reclamation as a priority on river-edge projects
- **What do you think should be prioritized?**
  - Addressing multi-jurisdictional challenges
  - Enforcement of regulations/policies
  - Maintenance
  - Coordination
  - Funding
  - Dependence on Volunteers
  - Permitting
- **How does this resonate with your experience with river-related projects?**
  - High-quality planting occurs for projects, but then no maintenance occurs, so vegetation fails (Calumet)
  - Project working with multiple owners and having difficulty figuring out who owns a property and what can be done with it (Calumet)
  - Development backed by a state funded tax/fund that can be used for maintenance and other developments (Hudson Yards)
  - Rail lines and transportation/utilities rights-of-way are impediments along the river.

### **Update: Working Groups and Government Partner Projects**

- System Plans Working Group: A System Plans Working Group meeting was held in May and discussed Chicago river-edge property land ownership conditions. Examples of different types of river-edge land ownership were reviewed and then members discussed challenges with the models. Five key themes were identified from the conversation.
- Development Review Working Group: There were no Development Review Working Group meetings held in the first and second quarters of 2024. Costco, which was reviewed in 2022, went before Plan Commission in April with changes made based on earlier Task Force comments. A system was set up to track comments and plan adjustments.
- Government Partner Project Updates: Updates were provided for ongoing 2024 work across the different government partners that participate as members of the Task Force including the Chicago Departments of Planning and Development, Transportation, Environment, and Public Health, the Chicago Park District, Forest Preserve District of Cook County, and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago. These updates varied from announcements about planning project kick-offs, to restoration work across the park system, to biological monitoring.

### **Adjourn and 2024 Task Force Meeting Dates**

Upcoming dates for 2024 meetings were provided to members.

Task Force:

- September 17: 3 pm to 4:30 pm
- December 3: 3 pm to 4:30 pm

System Plans Working Group:

- August 21: noon to 1 pm
- November 13: noon to 1 pm

The meeting concluded at 4:30 pm.