Calumet Area Land Use Plan and Design Guidelines Update

Working Group # 4 Meeting Summary

Tuesday, March 11, 2025 | 6:00 – 7:30 PM | Zoom

The below summarizes the content presented and feedback received during Working Group Meeting #4 for the Calumet Area Land Use Plan and Design Guidelines Update, led by the City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development (DPD). The summary is organized by a presentation section followed by a summary of the discussion. For questions, please reach out to Dhara Shah at dhara@musecommunitydesign.com.

WELCOME + INTRODUCTIONS

Dhara Shah (MUSE Community + Design), Lesley Roth (Lamar Johnson Collaborative), and Luke Mich (Chicago DPD) were the lead facilitators in Working Group #4.

Working group participants present for this meeting:

Name	Organization
Adam Flickinger	Friends of the Chicago River
Alaina Bridges	Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT)
Alexandra Rosander	Chicago Transit Authority (CTA)
Benet Haller	Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways (DoTH)
Beth Dybala	Calumet Area Industrial Commission (CAIC)
Don Campell	Go Middle River
Felicia Minley	Southeast Environmental Task Force (SETF)
Gaby Wagener-Sobrero	Chicago Department of the Environment (DOE)
Gail Walker	EnviroCom
Haley Sanders	Chicago Park District
Isis Bazaldua	Bridges // Puentes Justice Collective
Jack Rocha	UIC Great Cities Institute
Lauren Umek	Chicago Park District
Laura Verden	Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR)
Lolita Thompson	Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD)
Maggie Catania	Calumet Connect
Stephen Ostrander	Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)
Tracy Murray	9th Ward
Thomas Daniels	9th Ward
Vanessa Bly	Bridges // Puentes Justice Collective
Vanessa Schwartz	Metro Family Services

AGENDA:

1. Introduction
2. Open Space Network
3. Access to Open Space Network
4. Open Space and Surrounding Uses
5. Next Steps

WORKING GROUP #3 RECAP

In the prior working group, we reviewed:

1. Market Impressions
2. Economic & Market Overview
3. Industrial Future Visioning
4. Breakout

FOCUS OF WORKING GROUP #4

The following content is an overview of the Working Group #4 presentation. During this meeting, participants discussed quantity and access-related challenges to open space, considerations in open space expansion, and different types of open space. A separate conversation about riverfront access occurred on March 18th at the River Ecology Governance Task Force.

CALUMET OPEN SPACE NETWORK

Developing an Open Space Framework

The industrial corridors of the Calumet Area drive Chicago's economy with heavy industry and logistics hubs. Their proximity to the Calumet River, Lake Calumet, and wetlands necessitates a strategic open space framework to balance industry, sustainability, climate resilience, and community well-being.

The open space network should consider the following:

- Support Buffering and Transitions:
    - Addressing noise pollution, light pollution, and stormwater management is crucial for safeguarding public health and mitigating the impact of hazardous materials and industrial emissions on existing open spaces.

- Improve Access and Connectivity
    - Many open spaces currently lack easy access from all directions. Evaluating and improving the connections at the edges of these spaces could help ensure proper access between various land uses and open areas. Including the different users of these spaces (residents, workers, pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users) and assessing the economic benefits they might provide.
- Integrate Climate Resilience:
    - Developing strategies to align with the City of Chicago's climate objectives, focusing on reducing climate impacts in these areas.

Existing Conditions of the Calumet Open Space Network:

The 2002 Calumet Area Land Use Plan fostered an increase in open space. In 2002, 520 acres of open space existed within the study boundary, with the most significant being the Harborside International Golf Course. The 2002 plan recommended significant additional open space acreage, and the subsequent 2005 Calumet Open Space Reserve Plan highlighted key opportunity sites for open space. As of 2025, there has been a 185% increase in open space, with 1,480 acres total. Although there have been significant improvements, an additional 1,250 acres previously proposed for open space within the study area have yet to be realized.

Feedback from Community Meeting #1

Feedback from Community Meeting #1 related to open space was shared. Participants indicated that they want to see an increase of open space within the study boundary, specifically at the river access at 100th St. (UIC Great Cities project) and EPA Superfund sites. Participants noted that open spaces should take advantage of the views at SEPA station and add public access to Lake Calumet.

Large Group Discussion

The Working Group participated in an extensive discussion, responding to the following questions:

1. Does this information match your experience of the area? Is there anything we missed?
2. What questions do you have about the open space network?
3. Are there locations where new / expanded open space should be prioritized? If so, why?
4. Similarly, are there locations where new open spaces should be avoided? If so, why?

Participants emphasized balancing public access with environmental preservation, ensuring that some areas remain undisturbed to support ecological benefits like habitat preservation and stormwater management. Thoughtful planning is needed to determine which spaces should be open for public use and which should be protected. Connectivity between the region's marshes should go beyond traditional trails, incorporating recreational paths and bike infrastructure along the edges of industrial sites to support people and wildlife. There was also discussion about shifting the TWIC boundary to improve public access to certain areas. Concerns were raised about water quality in Lake Calumet, with some questioning whether it is safe for swimming. However, the focus remains on promoting recreational activities like trails and river-edge activities. Finally, participants stressed the importance of infrastructure that prioritizes the safety of cyclists and pedestrians.

OPEN SPACE ACCESS

Existing barriers and challenges to accessing open space were presented.

Key Barriers to Access

- Interstate Highways: I-94, located on the west side of the study area, makes it difficult for residents in Burnside, Riverside, and Pullman to access open spaces on the east side.
- Railroads: Extensive rail infrastructure serving industrial movement throughout the study area creates obstacles to reaching open spaces.
- Limited River and Lake Crossings: Few access points exist for crossing the lake and river, further restricting connectivity to open spaces.

Bike Access:

Existing bike routes are often disjointed and difficult to access from surrounding neighborhoods. Many are on-street, creating conflicts with heavy traffic, including large trucks. While bike trails improve accessibility, they often lack connections to open space. For example, Big Marsh Park, one of the largest open spaces in the center of the study area and home to an off-road bike course, has relatively poor bike access. However, there are existing routes that offer potential ideas for improvement:

1. Off-road trail at Burnham Greenway at Eggers Woods – This off-road trail provides a route through open spaces, demonstrating the potential for dedicated bike paths.
2. On-road bike lanes on Stony Island: Cyclists share the roadway with trucks, creating safety concerns, and there is no bike access along Doty Avenue to the north, which limits access to Stony Island in the first place.

3. Poor connections between bike routes and parks: In some cases, bike lanes or paths abruptly end before reaching open spaces, limiting their usefulness for open space access.

Lakefront open spaces served by off-road trails like the Burnham Parkway have good bike access (e.g., Calumet Park, Eggers Woods, William Powers)

Peripheral open spaces served by neighborhood bike lanes have fair bike access (e.g., Powderhorn Marsh, Rowan Park, Avalon Park)

Open spaces along Lake Calumet / Calumet River have poor bike access due to limited crossings and the hard-to-access / uncomfortable route on Stony Island (e.g., Big Marsh, Indian Ridge, Hegewisch Marsh).

There isn't a continuous path running north or south of the study boundary, but there is infrastructure connecting to open spaces. Some peripheral open spaces have bike lanes or paths nearby, making them somewhat accessible. However, reaching them from the east of the study area can still be challenging. Lastly, the middle of the study area holds a majority of green space acreage, yet access remains poor. Despite the bike path on Stony Island, the current infrastructure makes it difficult to reach these spaces.

Transit Access:

Transit access is limited, with significant gaps in east-west connectivity. Metra serves the west and north areas of the study boundary. While several bus routes exist, the service isn't frequent, especially near 103rd, where there is no service across 130th Street. These create additional barriers that restrict movement, limiting transit access to open space. Previously proposed transit investments included the Red Line Extension and Metra station improvements. Nearly all open spaces would see improved access due to the proposed bike routes listed below:

- 103rd St – Cottage Grove to Doty
- Cottage Grove Ave – 95th to 115th
- Stony Island Ave – Doty/103rd to 122nd
- 116th St – Big Marsh Park to Torrence
- 130th St – Indiana to 130th St Bridge

Red Line Extension would improve access to Beaubien Woods and provide connections to northern open spaces for Riverdale residents. Significant improvements to central open space access due to Cook County-proposed bike route investments.

Feedback from the Community on Access and Connectivity

Participants want to be able to walk along Lake Calumet and between the neighborhoods in Calumet. Including east-west connectivity. Participants highlighted the need to increase the number of dedicated paths for pedestrians and cyclists near and within Big Marsh, along Lake Calumet, and between the communities. Trails were mentioned several times within the responses as an option for increased connectivity. It's important to note that both residents and industrial business representatives indicated concerns about the safety of pedestrian use near truck routes.

Large Group Discussion:

Participants discussed improving connectivity, safety, and access in the Calumet region. A narrow stretch south of the Auto Warehouse Company (a Ford contractor) vehicle storage area, between Deadstick Pond and Indian Ridge Marsh, could serve as a trail for people and wildlife, offering a safer route away from busy roads. Indian Ridge Marsh and the SEPA station were highlighted as priority areas for investment.

Truck traffic was brought up frequently as a concern along Stony Island Avenue, Torrance Avenue, Doty Avenue, and Avenue O. Some participants suggested rerouting truck traffic before adding new non-motorized paths. Burley Avenue was mentioned as a possible focus area for balancing traffic safety and industrial needs. Many residents (schoolchildren and workers) struggle with missing sidewalks and unsafe crossings because of trucks and other pedestrian infrastructure on these roads and focus on separating trucks and bike infrastructure. Participants emphasized the need to listen to the community to ensure improvements address these challenges.

Better sidewalk connectivity is essential for residents, employers, and workers. The discussion highlighted the existing transit routes, emphasizing the importance of frequency and access, particularly for vulnerable users. For example, while Beaubien Woods has improved connectivity, some residents still must walk two miles to reach it. Overall, participants agreed on the need for a comprehensive approach that balances transportation, open space, and industrial activity while ensuring that the region's most vulnerable residents can access jobs, schools, and recreational areas safely.

EDGE CONDITIONS

Each existing open space differs in program, location, edge conditions, adjacencies, and context. Not all sites are publicly accessible, and not all are dedicated to recreation. It is important to view open space as a green infrastructure element that can help mitigate environmental and urban challenges.

Table 1: Edge Conditions and Guidelines for Assessment

Edge Condition Archetype	Guidelines
Open Space adjacent to Vacant Land	**Perception and safety:** Perceptions of neglect or insecurity can be improved by temporary activations / uses **Environmental considerations:** Erosion, invasive species, and uncontrolled runoff require ecological buffers, native plantings, and sustainable stormwater management **Future development integration:** Long-term uses for vacant land will need to be compatible with adjacent open spaces. Guidelines for setbacks, connectivity, and urban design can help **Public access and connectivity:** Permeable edges with pathways, view corridors, and interim public uses enhances accessibility and community benefits.
Open Space adjacent to Industrial land use:	**Environmental impact:** Buffers, berms, and vegetative barriers can address noise, air pollution, and runoff **Public health and safety:** Integrating EJ principles and addressing edge conditions can create safer conditions **Visual considerations:** Promote view corridors and screen unattractive uses **Ecological and stormwater management:** Green stormwater infrastructure can protect ecosystems and improve water quality **Connectivity and accessibility:** Enhance pedestrian and ecological linkages **Future land use flexibility:** Adaptive edge treatments improve transitions for potential redevelopments
Open Space adjacent to US EPA Superfund Site	**Environmental contamination / public health:** Buffering, remediation, and monitoring essential to prevent spread of contamination **Risk management and safety:** Use transitions, barriers, and signage can minimize exposure risks for users of adjacent open spaces **Stormwater and ecology:** Green stormwater infrastructure can capture and filter runoff from contaminated sites **Perception considerations:** Screening, landscape restoration, and community engagement can improve public perception of open spaces adjacent to contaminated sites

	Long-term land use planning / redevelopment: Adaptable edges allow open spaces to remain viable as multi-year cleanup efforts unfold
Open Space and Residential and Commercial Land Use	**Buffering and environmental protection:** Open spaces can serve as transitions / buffers to mitigate air, noise, and light pollution from industrial activities **Public health and safety:** Setbacks, landscaping, and tree canopies can improve air quality and improve safety **Access and connectivity:** Integrating open spaces with streetscapes, trails, and transit routes provides links between area uses and enhances mobility **Land use compatibility & economic benefits:** Open space amenities attract businesses and workers, supporting mixed-use vibrancy **Climate resilience and urban cooling:** Tree canopy and permeable surfaces can help counteract the heat island effect in industrial areas

Large Group Discussion

Participants discussed the role of edge conditions near schools and the opportunities to integrate green infrastructure in nontraditional areas such as utility corridors and other privately owned open spaces that could support stormwater management and ecological improvements through targeted agreements, creating new possibilities for environmental benefits on larger sites. There was also discussion about the role of tree canopies and buffer zones in environmental and community health. Expanding tree canopy coverage was highlighted as a way to mitigate urban heat and improve climate resilience. Some participants emphasized the ecological value and ecosystem services when considering everything but people.

Next Steps:

The next Working Group meeting is on Zoom on April 8th. The calendar invite has been sent out.

An announcement was made about the River Access and Usage discussion on Tuesday, March 18th, focusing on river-adjacent uses.