



River Ecology and Governance Task Force Summary | December 17, 2020

Ahead of the meeting, participants were asked to complete a survey to identify key interests and potential agenda items. The following four categories were created based on the survey results:

- I. River Project Review
- II. System Plans and the River / River Edge Development
- III. River Restoration and Ecology
- IV. Recreation Support and Education

The meeting began at 3:00PM via a Zoom conference call. DPD staff reported on the history of the task force and the recent City initiatives (We Will Chicago Citywide plan, Far South and South West Industrial Corridor Planning Frameworks).

The participants separated into breakout groups based on identified by the pre-meeting survey categories and were led on a participatory exercise to determine priorities and goals. Each breakout group was asked to respond to three questions:

Q1: What are the goals and priorities? define topic, key considerations

Q2: What are tools and resources needed to accomplish these goals?

Q3: What are success metrics and the timeframe for these goals?

SUMMARY

Task force participants were excited to be back to together after a long intermission. The following four themes emerged from discussions:

System Approach / Comprehensive Strategy Participants were very interested in a systemic and holistic approach to the river system, recognizing the role the river plays connecting regions, land uses, and project types. They want comprehensive river planning to be prominently positioned in the We Will Chicago citywide plan.

Land Uses and Economy Across the break-out groups, participants discussed the City's role in proactively encouraging development and uses deemed "complementary" to natural conservation and recreation along river edges. How does the City balance economic development and protect natural resources?

Ecological and Human Health The relationship between river health and human health was a core concern for many participants. Meaningful initiatives to improve the water and habitat can't ignore public health concerns.

Measuring Performance Participants sought to expand metrics beyond ecology goals and include assessments that address equity, community, and health impacts of initiatives. Others proposed that the City establish metrics to evaluate potential development projects and understand the performance of approved facilities.

The following sections document the comments and discussions for each group.

I. RIVER PROJECT REVIEW

Q1: What are the goals and priorities? define topic, key considerations

- There is an opportunity to work with comprehensive plan / land use planning... What tools do we have to be proactive?
- Community Supported plan and policies to support system approach – Including future land use plan
- Development - Speak to the future. There is no meaningful city-led initiative. No plan.
- Does this process help industrial development instead of other businesses?
- City is perpetuating 19th century land uses along the river.
- Health Considerations:
 - How to engage with CBOs at a meaningful point.
 - Need to consider health implications / river proximity
 - City - make use of the tools (CDPH) that are available.
 - Health implications about planning decision making. NRDC impacts map.
 - Opportunity to eliminate contributors to EJ factors. Use a planning process and establish a metric. Reduce the # of impacts in a community over time.
- What are opportunities unique to the Chicago river system?
- Need to be proactive. What is the vision for the river?
- We need goals to evaluate how appropriate development along the river is.
- Goal: Balance sustainable development. Industries that provide wealth creation for neighborhoods.

Q2: What are tools and resources needed to accomplish these goals?

- There is confusion around ownership. FCR land use map helps. Who to go to for permits / partnership when a project is in the pipeline.
- We should consult the nature conservancy mapping efforts that identify benefits and social vulnerabilities.
- Chicago green print is another potential tool.
- We Will Chicago Citywide plan is in process:
 - How will the planning process be structured - How will the river be included in this effort?
 - Neighborhood based planning vs. systemic planning (rivers, transit, lakefront, openspace, etc.) WWC - Needs to address these systemic areas along with neighborhoods.

Q3: What are success metrics and the timeframe for these goals?

- River is a natural system with many benefits / impacts on the City – We need to measure each co-benefit and identify which could be the most effective metrics.
- Recent public investments in the river have been made incrementally (and uncoordinated). Large scale investments are easier for setting timeframes – Easier to coordinate. How to coordinate all efforts?

- Seismic retrofitting incentives (loans) help protect properties. Can this model be used for the river system to support opening up the river for public use?
- Specific land uses and the river system:
 - The City is permitting other TDL developments: Property down to Belmont was identified in the North Branch Channel study.
 - We need to invest in forward looking and meaningful land use planning for the rivers (next few years). We are losing the ability to prevent specific land uses from impacting rivers.
 - We need to identify parcels that are likely to be targeted for development and push back against types of development proposals that may negatively impact access to the rivers.
 - The City needs to be more proactive – For example, what are the five most vulnerable sites? The Collateral channel is one location that could be prioritized / protected.

II. SYSTEM PLANS AND THE RIVER / RIVER EDGE DEVELOPMENT

Q1: What are the goals and priorities? define topic, key considerations

- Recreational space
- Wildlife habitat
- Equitable use and equitable access
- Utilize underdeveloped land
- Shoreline stabilization, runoff improvements
- Clean living waters
- Capturing stormwater
- Access and connectivity along the river
- Development that doesn't harm or hurt the river, works with the environment
- Development that compliments the river
- Not harmful to health of nearby residents
- Equity and undo past harms to populations
- Consider setbacks to developments in terms of space
- Ecological connectivity – linking river to protected areas
- Wildlife corridors for people and wildlife
- Wildlife friendly design – birds
- Enhances the environment, harmony
- Comprehensive approach to water
- No silos
- Consider the river is a natural resource if its restored it can contribute to resiliency, public health wellness and be an economic driver
- Artificial light sources are not disproportionately affecting the edge
- Wildlife shouldn't be negatively impacted
- Naturalized interface of littoral zone

Q2: What are tools and resources needed to accomplish these goals?

- Look into a blue-green corridor governed by a city-led plan to guide future land use
- Turn it into a comprehensive strategy, not a piecemeal strategy
- Systemize community conservation models to infuse identity and culture into the riverfront and the water itself – African American river trail
- Benchmark where we are now and create incentives to move that needle
- Increase setback from 30 to 60 feet (minimum)

- Streamline permitting – be more inclusive (state, local, federal)
- Address policies for wildlife
- Public engagement process – public should have a voice
- Public engagement should happen early on
- Create a policy pathway to get this job done – are there existing rules and regulations?
- Incentivize it
- Allow for collaboration between entities
- Reestablish the Chicago Department of Environment and create one focused on the river specifically – in correlation with the mayor’s office
- Have a mechanism to coordinate with organizations + mayor’s office so everyone buys in – master plan
- A regional, ecological research initiative to easily flesh out what we want to focus on and what resources we have – MWDRB has a large reach
- Chicago Wilderness is an umbrella group – the city could contribute
- Resolving/reducing/mitigating the effects of Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) outfalls at the river edge
- A tool to address would be to develop best practices that development can do to support this

Q3: What are success metrics and the timeframe for these goals?

- Quarterly check-ins to create benchmarks – every season?
- Dependent on what kind of scenario we have in terms of funding and how aggressively we pursue goals
- Define goals – have development goals, environmental goals, etc.
- Miles of publicly accessible riverfront, miles of restored riverfront, stretches of waterways removed from the CSO list, fishable, swimmable water
- Swimming is a metric and we’re not meeting the standard
- Needs own legal permits for combined sewage overflow
- Eliminate CSOs – benchmark and set goals toward progress to support positive impacts
- Compile metrics from developmental projects?
- 14 groups with the Chicago River Watershed council for a permanent approach to use open space to collect stormwater in process to develop a long-term partnership – manage stormwater by a watershed not by governmental boundaries – could coordinate with that group
- Leverage agencies potential and current work to access funding
- Think about public health metrics to include

III. RIVER RESTORATION AND ECOLOGY

Q1: What are the goals and priorities? define topic, key considerations

- Keeping habitat in mind. Engage the river and create networks of habitats.
- Lack of habitat for various life stages. Improvement in aquatic life. Functional restoration of waterways to improve aquatic life and water quality.
 - This might be accomplished through floating planters that help create habitat in areas where steel or concrete is used to retain and the river cannot be returned to a natural edge
- Speed to a healthier system/river health. Improving the health of water and habitat.
 - Sense of urgency. Get it done.
- Identify a reliable source of funding for long-term maintenance
- Make sure that river health is a primary consideration in development
 - Systemic impact of the entire system
- Dialogue between development group and science/conservation group

- Including communities in the discussion/development for any intervention

Q2: What are tools and resources needed to accomplish these goals?

- Guide/standard for restoration. What is ecologically beneficial?
- Take a look at current efforts and how those can be improved, etc.
- Friends of Chicago River currently working on a design guide.
- Health Impact Assessment and Equity Impact Assessment.
- How will this impact specific communities?
- How will NOT intervening impact the community? (the Negative effect of existing conditions.)
- Working with the new office of Equity within mayor’s office
- Transparency and Awareness of what is being proposed by the development community. Educate the development community on current environmental efforts/initiatives. Communication between groups.
- Continuing education for Arch/Engineering/Developers
- Working with the Arch/Engineering firms so that they can present these ideas to the developers
- Using public sector projects as a chance to provide demonstrations/tests
- Find a way to give recognition to developments that are doing a good job at achieving these goals. Awards, recognition, incentive, etc.
 - levels of certification for river friendliness
- General communication problem with the public. Needs to be prioritized much earlier in the process. Community needs access to this information much sooner, before it’s too late to change plans and before they’re approved.
- River Overlay zones could help much like a historic district has specific requirements for development. Make it part of a process.
- Land use regime. Notice requirement. Assessment.
- Anything along the river system impacts the rest of the system.
- Compiling a centralization of notifications – Resource list of all organizations invited and more.
- Creating a review board
- Resource list for particular locations that should be targeted, benefit from restoration
- Visual format
- Being proactive when sites become available. Creating a plan. Researching “good” firms, etc. for developments
- Looking at things through an environmental justice lens – but also an economic one.
- Using info from study with Army Core of Engineers
- Stop activities happening now that would have further negative impact – less need to dredge out and dispose of matter later, which tends to happen predominantly in south side communities anyway.

Q3: What are success metrics and the timeframe for these goals?

- Use city data as a tool for measuring success
 - Using city data as a benchmark
 - How things like air quality, measurements of soil and river water content compare before and after intervention.
- Prioritizing health at all levels. Celebrating projects that are improving health in multiple communities. This is human and ecological.
- A sense of Urgency – groups organized enough to be proactive. Phasing in deadlines and follow up.

IV. RECREATION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

Q1: What are the goals and priorities? define topic, key considerations

- Broadly to connect people to the river and to each other

- We did a lot of ideation already
 - Would like to know where the group has been previously, what are priorities previously identified? What can Daniel's group do to help move those priorities forward?
 - Not sure what has been accomplished, would be helpful to see notes from Kathy
- Strengthen connections between communities – thinking about multi facets of health, vibrancy of our culture
- Lots of different groups doing their own projects – entities getting into sync, exchanging info and communicating, identifying different funding sources
 - First time a lot of these groups were connecting and discussing. Could help consolidate initiatives.
- Suggestion to break down into three categories: recreation, support, education
- Overlap with Great Rivers Initiative – how to connect using this platform. How do we overlap? How can we work together better?
- This looks different depending on which stretch of river you're looking at. Disappointed to not see public health as a focus. Recreation is a hard conversation for areas focused on public health needs. Can't discuss recreation broadly – environmental concerns, community willingness to embrace recreation are factors
- Recreation viewed in two ways: access to the river but it's inaccessible (health/safety) or it's accessible but you can't engage due to physical reasons or feeling unwelcome
 - Safety is different depending on who you're talking to.
 - Yes, bringing resources to fit needs of the different communities.
- The Science and Design Working Group also discussed the possibility of releasing an illustrated graphic manual of best design practices and community outreach methods, that could be used in professional communities but also in schools. It would build on the DPD Chicago River Development Guidelines, but also the 1913 Wacker Manual plan of Chicago. Perhaps this could be another opportunity to help the REGTF craft a constructive, implementable, and engaging design strategy for the river.
- Opportunity: what goals or impact do we want to have? Changing perceptions is one idea. Great Rivers may provide a framework or provide inspiration.
- Acknowledging different types of use outside of traditional recreation. How do we engage with the water as a resource? Your relationship to the river impacts your view of recreation.
- UIC City Design Studio: conducted studio with Master's Degree students on the river. Want to commit to multi-year studio format. Want the river to be a visible living laboratory.

Q2: What are tools and resources needed to accomplish these goals?

- Communal database where information can be shared, especially during a time of limited resources available. Where does this live?
 - Wasn't there a website for the river ecology governance group?
 - I'm pasting a link to the goals of the Inviting section of the Our Great Rivers vision. That was based on input from 6,000 residents. <http://greatriverschicago.com/goals/index.html>
 - I seem to remember that The Friends of the Chicago River was working on a web portal for the Committee
 - We used The Friends' GIS portal for land use/infrastructure layers in our studio process.
- Important to keep track of previous conversations and bring that information back
- Need to understand our audience and there are a lot of different audiences. Difficult to activate areas that are already available.
- Amazon Distribution Facility approved on south branch of the river. The community wasn't properly engaged and this happened without coordination of all interested parties.

- What do we mean by “recreation”? We have different answers depending on how we define it. Balancing this with other goals (ecological, etc)? Also many definitions of community/neighbors.
- Need to acknowledge all the work that’s been done in the past and talk about those definitions more so we can all be on the same page.
- Maximize where we do have public land and find balance between what community wants to see and challenges around private property.
 - Prioritize those areas – be proactive about acquisition and utilization

Q3: What are success metrics and the timeframe for these goals?

- *This question was not addressed*

The meeting was adjourned at 4:00PM.