

River Ecology and Governance Task Force

6/3/2025 | 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 42 participants 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.

South Branch Framework Plan Planning Initiative Presentation and Discussion

The project manager from the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) presented their proposal to create a framework for the South Branch of the Chicago River. The purpose and goal is to integrate past plans into a comprehensive strategy for the community areas touching the river in Bridgeport, Chinatown, and McKinley Park. Through understanding gaps and existing conditions as well as analyzing and synthesizing information from past planning efforts, this framework will consolidate recommendations and articulate a clear implementation plan to guide future city initiatives. The strategy will include comparative analysis and coordination with sister agencies and departments, community partners, and the 11th and 12th ward offices, as well as other stakeholders. The goal is to have the plan adopted by Plan Commission in fall 2025.

After providing an overview of the framework's goals, DPD presented four questions to the group for discussion:

- 1) Given the amount of community engagement completed by previous studies, how would this group like to be engaged?
- 2) Are there any missing topics, items or discussions from your area of expertise that you think should be incorporated?
- 3) Are there any planning initiatives or other information we should be aware of that your organization is sponsoring or would like to share?
- 4) Is there anything else you would like to share?

Task Force members did not have much input on the first, third, or fourth question but did have feedback on the second question and encouraged DPD to consider adding in items and topics related to instream features, historic landmarks, contaminated sites, habitat connectivity, and harbor safety data. If there are any updates or changes to the plans that are being reviewed as part of the consolidation Task Force members were advised to reach out to the DPD project manager whose information was shared in the chat.

Government Partner Project Updates

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) and the City of Chicago's Department of the Environment separately provided brief presentations on one of their respective priority projects.

Robbins Flood Control Project

MWRD presented their flood control project to help reduce flooding and restore Midlothian Creek in the village of Robbins. The project addresses overbank flooding through a new stormwater park and pond along with improvements to Midlothian Creek and an overflow channel that connects to the Cal-Sag Channel. After the project is complete, it will provide protection up to a 100-year storm event. Work kicked off in June 2022 and was divided into two phases. The first phase was completed in December 2024 and included construction of a diversion channel and installation of pipe culverts. The second phase, which is currently

underway, will be completed in January 2026 and includes construction of a stormwater park, installation of storm sewer along Midlothian Creek, streambank stabilization and construction of a diversion channel.

Task Force members asked several questions after the presentation:

- How will the project be maintained?
 - The contractor is responsible for maintenance for three years, which runs to 2029 since final completion is in 2026. The contractor will also provide a maintenance manual for the village of Robbins.
- Are fish going to be monitored occasionally to see if they make their way there?
 - Fish cribs and stone anchors will be installed along Midlothian, but unsure if they will be monitored. Monitoring is not currently in the plan, but it may be possible.
- Will bioswales be surrounded by fencing after completion?
 - May issue an RFP to put guardrails around some of the bioswales due to steep slopes. Currently discussing with the village.

Contact information was provided for the project manager if there were any additional questions.

Hazel Johnson Cumulative Impacts Ordinance

The Chicago Department of the Environment presented the Hazel Johnson Cumulative Impacts Ordinance. The ordinance was developed to address the findings and policy recommendations of the 2023 Cumulative Impact Assessment, which identified communities that are overburdened by a combination of environmental, health, and social stressors. The ordinance requires a cumulative impact study for new and expanding intensive industrial facilities and creates an Environmental Justice Advisory Board to review the results of the cumulative impact study and provide suggestions and guidance to the City on plans and policies. It also changes the zoning process for the subset of heavy industrial uses that are subject to the ordinance. They would move from a by-right process into either a Planned Development or Special Use depending on size. The ordinance also provides an opportunity for the inclusion of mitigation measures to address project impacts, like air pollution, as part of the site plan review. The ordinance was introduced at City Council in April, and it currently sits in the Rules Committee.

Task Force members had several questions/comments after the presentation:

- Is the community meeting for the environmental justice review separate from the community meeting that is often part of the Planned Development process?
 - Believes it is the same meeting.
- There were concerns about how this will impact the industrial corridors and businesses. A Task Force member made a recommendation for the City to have more than one person from the business community on the Environmental Justice Advisory Board.
- How will this impact new businesses that are looking to come to Chicago versus existing?
 - Not many new businesses would be impacted by this ordinance. Typically, it is about six a year.
- The City should consider the cost of regulation versus innovation. Texas delivers water reuse projects just by having guidelines.

Updates were also provided on priority government partner projects from the Chicago Dept. of Planning and Development (DPD), Dept. of Transportation, Dept. of Public Health, as well as the Chicago Park District, and Forest Preserve District of Cook County.

Reminders, Upcoming Summer Events, and Participation Opportunities

Many partners and Task Force members are hosting summer events and public meetings. A few were shared during the Task Force meeting:

- Beaubien Woods Celebration – Saturday June 14
<https://fpdcc.com/event/beaubien-woods-celebration-2/>
- Bridgehouse Museum Speaker Series – June 26, July 10, July 24, August 7, August 21
<https://www.chicagoriver.org/events/bridgehouse-museum-happy-hour-speaker-series-chicago-nighthawk-project>
- Wild Mile Summer Events – June 5, June 8, June 11
<https://urbanrivers.org/events>

Project Challenges Check-In

Task Force members were reminded of the Rivers Questions [Google Form](#) to help members pose river project-related questions to government partners. Friends of the Chicago River and the Metropolitan Planning Council review the questions that are submitted and direct inquiries to the appropriate contacts.

Adjourn and Future 2025 Task Force Meeting Dates

Upcoming dates for 2025 meetings were provided to members.

Task Force

- September 16: 3 pm to 4:30 pm
- December 9: 3 pm to 4:30 pm

System Plans Working Group

- August 20: 1 pm – 2 pm
- November 19: 1 pm – 2 pm

The meeting concluded at 4:30 pm.