

# River Ecology and Governance Task Force

3/18/2025 | 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 65 participants attended the meeting. Participants included both Task Force members as well as members of the working group involved in the Calumet Area Land Use Plan and Design Guidelines Update. Members of the working group joined for the first half of the meeting, which focused on providing an update on the project.

### 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.

### Calumet Area Land Use Plan and Design Guidelines Update and Discussion

Muse, the Department of Planning and Development's community engagement consultant for the project, began the presentation by providing an overview of the project's objectives and goals. The team first gave a definition of what a land use plan entails as well as what is included as part of design guidelines. Next, they introduced the results of their site analysis related to past planning efforts. This included points of access for vessels, like barge facilities and activity, as well as current and proposed access and mobility networks for bicyclists and pedestrians. Their site analysis reviewed: 1) compatible land uses; 2) previously identified access sites in prior plans; 3) areas with limited barge interference; and 4) potential for bike and/or pedestrian connections. They overlaid these four points to identify potential opportunity sites for riverfront access. Opportunity Sites included: 1) Former Wisconsin Steel Site, 2) SEPA #1 / Auto Warehousing Lot; 3) Hegewisch Marsh / CID Landfill.

After introducing the Opportunity Sites, the team conducted an engagement activity via Mentimeter to determine a general level of agreement (on a scale of 1 to 5) among the participants about whether the proposed Opportunity Sites should be recommended for riverfront access. They also asked follow-up questions about why participants selected a certain response. Participants were also asked to choose from a list of options about the types of river edge programming that would be appropriate for each site. These options included: Riverwalk/trail, Overlook/seating area, Habitat restoration, Fishing, Kayak/canoe launch, and other. Habitat restoration was the most selected option for the Former Wisconsin Steel Site. Riverwalk/trail and Habitat restoration were the most selected for the SEPA #1 / Auto Warehousing Lot. Habitat restoration was the most selected for the Hegewisch Marsh / CID Landfill. Finally, the team also asked a free response question about other river-edge programming the participants would want to see in addition to the options that the team had provided.

Questions and responses during the engagement activity included the following:

- How has the recent court case that resulted in the closing of the Army Corps of Engineers Confined Disposal Facility impacted your analysis? My understanding is that without dredging (and then disposing of that dredged material) the Calumet River will struggle to be maintained as a deep port. Does this impact the types of ships and industrial usage?

*We're still monitoring this situation. From the Corps' initial response to the ruling, it sounds like they intend to seek out an alternative site to continue maintaining the deep channel.*

- Has there been an assessment of the landfill recently in terms of toxicity/soil? How would that compare to slag mounds at Big Marsh?

*Team has not done an official review, but it is something that they can look into.*

- Just as a general question, is there any consideration of having land use and design requirements that would, over time, phase towards more river front connectivity and potential trails?

*This is certainly something we're looking at. Likely, that kind of guidance would be provided in the design guidelines rather than the land use framework (though the latter could point to the locations where this would be most beneficial).*

- This is a random question. But if there is already water access in the area, is there funding to support that? For example Chicago's finest marina has a boat launch and potentially a space for kayaks.

*As part of this process, we are identifying a land use framework and where new access makes sense, as well as if there are city resources that can be aligned for that goal—but will not be tackled officially in the land use plan.*

The presentation and engagement activity concluded with a summary of the next steps, which includes a public meeting at the end of June. The consultant team provided contact information, so that participants could reach out for more information.

## **2025 Task Force Work Plan Outcomes and Objectives**

The Task Force reviewed the work plan for 2025. The goals, objectives, and activities for 2025 were refined based on feedback and input from the December 2024 Task Force meeting.

- **Goal #1: Create recommendations to inform river-related policies, plans, and projects to advance collective priorities**

Two projects that government Task Force partners are advancing in 2025 provide opportunities for significant and meaningful input from other Task Force members. These include: Calumet Area Land Use Plan and Design Guidelines Update led by the Department of Planning and Development, and the Citywide Green Stormwater Infrastructure Strategy Update led by the Department of the Environment. There are points during the planning processes where Task Force members can weigh in on aspects related to the river and river edge.

- **Goal #2: Leverage Task Force and community expertise to help advance future river investment priorities**

There are several information gathering opportunities that were discussed last year that are appropriate for members of the Task Force to advance this year through the System Plans Working Group as well as other avenues. This includes: 1) collecting ecological and local community data about river edge "soft" sites; 2) exploring the successes and challenges with implementation of river projects to document best practices; and 3) learning from local community perspectives to include in advocacy and river project input efforts.

- **Goal #3: Work collaboratively with agencies to improve river asset governance and management methods**

The River Assets Working Group, created last year, will continue its efforts to evaluate and understand the feasibility of creating a more clearly defined governance structure for riverfront public asset. This will include developing a short and long-term work plan.

- **Goal #4: Ensure process for river development reviews is followed and continues to improve new riverfront developments**

Meetings, as needed, will continue to be hosted to provide review and guidance on new riverfront projects along the Chicago and Calumet rivers. The Task Force will also document and report out on how the reviews have impacted projects.

## **What are you working on this year?**

The Task Force members participated in an engagement activity using the collaboration platform Miro to provide information on the river-related projects that they are advancing in 2025. Members entered the [Miro Board](#) and filled out virtual sticky notes with the name of their project, their organization, river location, and a brief project description. The goal is to create an overall map of Task Force projects so that members are informed of each other's activities to foster broader collaboration and coordination.

## **Government Partner Project Update: Green Stormwater Infrastructure Plan (GSI) Update**

The Department of the Environment provided a brief presentation on their strategy to update 2014's Green Stormwater Infrastructure Strategy. The goal is for the updated plan to set a cohesive vision for how GSI will be implemented citywide to inform future policy, funding, maintenance, and better citywide coordination to address

stormwater and flooding challenges in different communities. Greenprint Partners is the City's consultant, and they are developing maps of existing GSI, so that decisions can be made prioritizing the location of new infrastructure investments. They are also putting together a community engagement plan with three in-person community engagement sessions planned for the first week of May. Task Force members were invited to participate in a meeting with the Greater Chicago Watershed Alliance to be held on May 21. The meeting will provide an opportunity to review strategy and GSI typologies. The GSI plan is set to be published in late 2025.

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

### **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

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

#### System Plans Working Group

- May 21: 1 pm – 2 pm
- August 20: 1 pm – 2 pm
- November 19: 1 pm – 2 pm

The meeting concluded at 4:30 pm.