

River Ecology and Governance Task Force

12/03/2024 | 3 pm to 4:30 pm

MEETING MINUTES

Welcome and Introductions

The meeting began at 3pm with participants introducing themselves in the chat. Approximately 35 members of the Task Force 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.

Small Group Discussion: Work Plan 2024 Outcomes and 2025 Objectives

Before breaking into small groups, the full Task Force reviewed updates on the Work Plan objectives completed in 2024 through quarterly and working group meetings. The three working groups are: System Plans, Development Review, and River Assets.

1. Goal #1: Review current policies and create recommendations to strengthen them

At the December 2023 quarterly Task Force meeting, members participated in a survey ranking topics that they were interested in working on in 2024. *Improving access to river edge* received the greatest number of votes and was the topic on which the System Plans Working Group meetings focused. The System Plans Working Group collected information on barriers and opportunities, identified missing information that needs to be gathered, and had discussions specifically focused on ownership challenges and urban water trails.

2. Goal #2: Inform near-term planning opportunities to advance collective priorities

The Task Force gave input to inform Chicago Department of Transportation's River Edge Access Study and the creation of their recently launched planning tool. The planning process for the update to the Calumet Area Land Use Plan and Design Guidelines also began. Discussion on the Calumet focused initiatives will continue in 2025.

3. Goal #3: Develop criteria to prioritize projects for identified funding opportunities

This goal was redesigned to connect to the creation and work of the River Assets Working Group. The River Assets Working Group is understanding the feasibility of creating a more clearly defined governance structure to maintain, enhance, and oversee expansion of riverfront public assets in Chicago. As part of this work, the group explored case studies from other cities focusing on funding and investment structures and regulatory models.

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

Early this year, development teams were provided with the "Chicago Rivers – Partner-Gathered Context Information" document, created as part of the Systems Plans Working Group meetings in 2023. Over time, the process and role of the development review has become better documented with a dedicated page on the City's website detailing the expectations for the development review meetings. Feedback and the types of changes made to development proposals after the review is also tracked. In 2024, the Development Review Working Group provided formal written comments on DuSable Park and the QTS Data Center expansion. The Development Review Working Group also hosted informal meetings focused on understanding the overall project pipeline and the PsiQuantum project.

The Task Force divided into three groups to review the goals, objectives, tasks, and priorities that came out of the work planning in 2023 and discuss how to advance, refine, and update the goals for 2025:

- Are these still the right goals and objectives?
- What needs to be changed or added?
- What emerging river needs should be considered to include for next year?

- What new goals and objectives should the Task Force consider as priorities for 2025?

High level takeaways from the breakout group discussion include:

- Participants primarily agreed that these goals and objectives were the right ones to pursue, with some edits, changes, and additions:
 - Goal #2: Specify to include the broader public with the Task Force's work to be more public facing; A cohesive river plan is needed that is innovative on access and trails on both public and private land
 - Goal #3: Community engagement is needed, particularly engaging with frontline communities
 - Goal #4: Allow for more resident access to meeting spaces with greater proactive advocacy for what the Task Force would like to see as part of new riverfront developments; Connect with riverfront property owners and departments/agencies external of the formal development approval process
- Participants also discussed new goals, objectives, and strategies to consider including:
 - Catalogue what has been successful and what challenges there have been with development projects into one accessible document
 - Provide a questionnaire to the development team prior to the development review working group meeting
 - Quantify investments in river edge development to see what can be leveraged for additional support
 - Map out how to solve the challenge of potentially less federal funding for Chicago-based projects and what funding streams are getting tighter/ending; Outcomes could/should include how to request additional funding from the State of Illinois
 - Push for a more stable and consistent funding source for the river
 - Determine the properties that may be ripe for development and proactively provide recommendations to developers/property owners, consider creating a one-pager on each property
 - Collect ecological data about soft sites and document all important species in the river, including rare species to consider what may be affected by developers
 - Provide input on RFPs for stormwater and green stormwater infrastructure planning
 - Include a way to evaluate the outcomes for projects where input was incorporated as part of the development review process
 - Develop post-occupancy review criteria by year
 - Consider direct action to create access points for people to get in and out of the river and advocate for more ladders, this is in addition to understanding the role of the Harbor Safety Committee
 - Coordinate with groups that have overlapping interests and conduct a gap analysis in neighborhood river planning to add local capacity to neighborhoods that could use additional support

River Assets Working Group Update and Discussion

The River Assets Working Group was created this year with the goal to evaluate and understand the feasibility of creating a more clearly defined governance structure to maintain, enhance, and oversee expansion of riverfront public assets. The group participated in three workshops, the April meeting focused on defining challenges and barriers to creating and managing river assets. The July workshop discussed case studies of other municipalities and their governance structures that could inform Chicago's structure. The October workshop focused on proposed short-term and long-term strategies to address challenges based on four theme areas: Planning and Visioning, Clear Responsibilities and Information Transparency, Facilities Management and Maintenance, Diversified, and Coordinated Funding for Capital Investment and Maintenance.

Task Force members reviewed the proposed short-term and long-term strategies and participated in a survey activity via Mentimeter to provide feedback on priorities and how the recommendations could improve the work of the participants and their organizations, including potential challenges that may arise. Short-term and long-term strategies include:

Short term:

- Undertake citywide river plan consolidation process to gather identified visions, priorities, and goals into a comprehensive River Corridor Action Plan
- Adopt a timeline for regularly updating river related ordinances, guidelines, and policies
- Identify staff to navigate the process by advising and reviewing public river projects for compliance
- Establish and river related information clearinghouse (website) to provide public facing information about mapped jurisdiction, ownership, and permitting requirements related to Chicago's rivers
- Development of maintenance standards and enforcement methodology

- Intergovernmental agreement model to help expand funding options and flexibility from more than one source

Long term:

- Create a river corridor district to guide further investment in private and public river edge land, using the Lakefront Protection ordinance as a precedent
- Modernize the Waterways Ordinance to align with a River Corridor Action Plan
- Consolidate ownership for river-related land into a single entity or create standard conservation easements that apply to all private projects
- Enforce standard maintenance and provide funding and technical assistance to support broader and consistent maintenance
- Tools such as special taxing districts or BIDs could be considered to spark improvements and maintenance along river corridor areas of need
- A delegate agency strategy could help formalize a funding pipeline for capital investments

Key takeaways include:

- *River plans consolidation with goals* was ranked the most important short-term strategy.
- *River corridor district to guide priorities for investment* was ranked the most important long-term strategy followed closely by *Funding and technical assistance for maintenance*.
- Overall, strategies could improve the work of organizations through:
 - Coordinated and official comprehensive plans providing clear guidance for development review, helping to coordinate advocacy for projects, creating timelines for ongoing and planned river projects, thereby making it easier to create projects that are feasible
 - Maintenance plans and enforcement to ensure more areas of riverfront property are well-maintained
 - Expanded areas for native planting, habitat opportunities, community engagement, and education can be used as an example for restoring other urban waterways
 - Improved approvals and permitting processes
 - Improved funding for overdue maintenance for public and private land
- Potential challenges to implementation include:
 - Limitations to local funding and skilled workforce
 - Need for a varied approach to riverfront standards (the riverfront is not one-size-fits-all)
 - Politics—consolidated ownership will be difficult to implement and there needs to be considerable political will to maintain the waterways as a focus for resiliency, economic, and recreational value
 - Coordination across geographic and jurisdictional boundaries with all relevant public and private sector stakeholders: agencies, corporations, institutions, individuals, etc.
 - Potential reluctance of agencies and departments that lack capacity to review and overhaul outdated river-related policies and processes

Government Partner Project Updates

Updates were 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. DPD also noted that although the PsiQuantum planned development was approved at the November Plan Commission meeting, there will be other phases throughout the process that may allow for additional input and approval.

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 2025 Task Force Meeting Dates

Dates for the 2025 quarterly Task Force meetings were provided. Meetings will be hosted on March 18, June 3, September 16, and December 9. Calendar invites will be sent out in early 2025.

The meeting adjourned at 4:30pm.