

River Ecology and Governance Task Force

03/12/2024 | 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 45 members of the Task Force attended the meeting. Friends of the Chicago River noted that both Friends of the Chicago River and the Metropolitan Planning Council will continue to support the City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development (DPD) in facilitating the Task Force in 2024.

Task Force Work Plan for 2024

Task Force Goals and Objectives

The group began with a refresher on the Task Force objectives and the broader role of the Task Force. The Task Force is focused on transforming the waterway system into a thriving and ecologically integrated natural asset through coordinated planning, investment, and management. Ultimately, 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.

2024 Work Plan

The Task Force reviewed the work plan for 2024, based on the four short-term goals presented at the meeting in December 2023.

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

Explore river edge access issues and opportunities was the highest ranked topic from the December quarterly meeting and will be discussed this year during the System Plans Working Group meetings as well as through the Chicago Department of Transportation's River Edge Access Study. Task Force members began reviewing the topic at the first System Plans meeting of the year in February and participated in an activity to respond to prompts related to barriers, case studies, data needs, and potential policies that can be updated to improve and expand river access.

The report on additional [context information to inform new development](#) was also completed and has been posted on the DPD's Rivers Ecology and Governance Task Force webpage.

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

There are two projects that government Task Force partners are advancing in 2024 that provide the opportunity for significant and meaningful input from other Task Force members. These include the Chicago Department of Transportation's River Edge Access Study and the Department of Planning and Development-led Calumet Design Guidelines and Land Use Update. The Task Force will weigh in and provide feedback on these key river edge projects when appropriate.

The March meeting includes a discussion on the River Edge Access Study as a separate agenda item. DPD provided a brief update on the timeline for the Calumet Design Guidelines and Update process. The process will conclude in 2026. The goal is to have a long engagement process due to the size of the area and the plan. DPD is currently working through the procurement process.

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

Last year, this goal was discussed in small groups and a list of key topics for exploration was developed based on needing a better understanding of the questions and implications for prioritizing projects through criteria. Since then, a new opportunity has arisen that could provide some support around project advancement, prioritization, and funding.

As part of the work plan this year, the Task Force is aiming to form a governance working group to scope what it would mean to create a governance entity to maintain, enhance, and oversee expansion of riverfront public spaces and trails. The idea of a governance entity is not new and is something that many members of the Task Force have mentioned is needed to ensure that river and riverfront projects and spaces have long-term viability. A governance working group will be formed to help scope and answer some key questions about what this type of entity could be in a Chicago context throughout the course of this year. Through this, we believe that a lot of questions around project prioritization and funding will also be reviewed. For future meetings, the Goal will be updated to be more aligned with scoping of the governance entity.

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

For this goal, the Task Force wants to ensure the process that was developed for reviewing new development projects along the Chicago and Calumet rivers remains in place and feedback is provided to development teams. The Task Force will provide development teams with the “Chicago-Rivers – Partner-Gathered Context Information” document developed by the System Plans Working Group and formally roll out the guidelines for the development review process. These guidelines are located on the [Development Review Working Group webpage](#). The Task Force will also track how the group’s feedback has informed changes to development projects.

River Edge Access Study Update and Q&A

The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) and its consultant, AECOM, provided an update on their work advancing the River Edge Access Study. The project will wrap up in early summer and they have created a draft mapping tool, using experience builder, to output data river access connectivity visualizations. The planning tool will be dynamic and includes separate sections for both inventory and analysis. The data used for the tool will also be embedded within a Story Map deliverable. CDOT will have a formalized procedure for updating the tool. AECOM demonstrated how to use the tool and reviewed the data sets included. The tool includes the following components: Instructions, Inventory Tool, and Analysis Tool. The Inventory and Analysis Tools are set up similarly but the criteria and information they draw from are different. The information button identifies the methodology and sources used to put together the criteria.

During the demonstration, AECOM noted that if you zoom into an area the tool shows not only a snapshot of what exists but also trails that have been proposed or are being planned. Users can also export data in a filtered way or a broad way. There were questions from Task Force members concerning how the trail gap length is calculated and the categories that define the lengths, the definition being used for trails and whether that is paved, unpaved, and/or multi-use, and how the “susceptible to change” classification was calculated. CDOT wrapped up the presentation by providing information on the different types of scenarios where the tool could be useful in making decisions. AECOM requested additional questions and feedback from Task Force members. Specifically, they are looking for feedback on the following:

- Are there layers or concepts in the proposed inventory that are missing?
- What are other queries the tool can address?
- After seeing the tool's analysis, do you have ideas of how this could be applied to some of the connectivity projects happening today or in the future?
- Do you have thoughts about how to show some of this data to be useful for exploring river connectivity/access work?
- What improvements can be made to the overall tool content and organization?

Additional information and a way to collect feedback will be provided to Task Force members as a follow-up.

IEPA Triennial Review Process and Q&A

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency provided an update on the status of its Triennial Review Process. The Triennial review assesses, develops, and revises water quality standards every three years in accordance with the clean water act. Several topics were selected for review that overlap with the goals of the Task Force including updating procedures for determining water quality criteria and evaluating designated

recreational uses in Bubbly Creek and the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. Next steps in the process include regulations and rule-making. There are opportunities for public participation in the process. Those interested in staying engaged should reach out to manager Scott Twait at scott.twait@illinois.gov.

Presentation on Trash/Litter Ecological Dynamics

Timothy Hoellein, a professor in the Department of Biology at Loyola University Chicago presented on trash in the freshwater ecosystem, with an emphasis on plastic waste. Much of the waste found is plastic, which is a wide term for polymers, and includes microplastics. Microplastics are not regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency. Plastic waste has increased over time, and it is often managed by sending it to other countries. We have an understanding of the trash found in Chicago's rivers through the work of clean-ups that have been provided through the Friends of the Chicago River's "Litter Free Task Force", which has helped track the type of waste found in rivers. The installation of "Seabins" installed in the Chicago River downtown also helps collect trash to help understand what is in the river. Beach clean-ups are also helpful for collecting and understanding trash. In terms of policy, there could be a focus on addressing waste water that comes out of washing machines with the goal of capturing microplastic fibers that come from textiles through filters. Nurdles, small pellets produced by industry, could also be a focus, requiring new policies for transport, storage and manufacturing. In order to move forward to address waste, more data is needed to understand what waste needs to be targeted and then solutions need to be generated that include innovation, education and policies.

Summary of Debris Collection Program

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) provided an update on their debris collection program. Per their consent decree requirements, MWRD must report on the amount of trash collected, which relies on skimmer boat. The skimmer boats skim the water surface collective floatable debris in a collection basket. The basket can be lifted with a winch to improve water flow when not actively skimming. Two boats are operated for floatable debris with regular collection occurs between April and October. Service areas include Bubbly Creek, the Main Branch, North Branch up to North Ave. and the South Branch down to the Amtrak Bridge at Ping Tom Park. Special operations of the skimmer boats can be triggered by Combined Sewer Overflow events. The boats are deployed to these areas within 24 hours after the end of the storm. In 2023, a grant total of 161.15 cubic yards of debris was collected by skimmer boats. MWRD also has a small streams maintenance program that removes logs to help keep smaller streams flowing.

Adjourn and 2024 Task Force Meeting Dates

Upcoming dates for 2024 meetings were provided to members.

Task Force:

- June 11: 3 pm to 4:30 pm
- September 17: 3 pm to 4:30 pm
- December 3: 3 pm to 4:30 pm

System Plans Working Group:

- May 22: noon to 1 pm
- August 21: noon to 1 pm
- November 13: noon to 1 pm

The meeting concluded at 4:30 pm.