

River Ecology and Governance Task Force

12/05/23 | 3:00 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.

Revised Task Force Goals and Work Plan 2024 - 2025

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.

Proposed Short-Term Goals 2024 – 2025

The Task Force reviewed the goal recommendations as well as the work plan activities associated with each of the goals. The short-term goals for 2024 – 2025 are mainly revisions to the goals that were advanced from 2021 – 2022.

- **Goal #1:** Review current policies and create recommendations to strengthen them.
- **Goal #2:** Inform near-term planning opportunities to advance collective priorities.
- **Goal #3:** Develop criteria to prioritize projects for identified funding opportunities.
- **Goal #4:** Ensure process for development reviews is followed and continues to improve new riverfront developments.

The September Task Force meeting focused on two of the goals with members completing a Google Jam Board activity for Goal #1, providing input on the policies to review and develop joint recommendations. There was also discussion on Goal #3 and funding opportunities available for projects.

- **Goal #1: Review current policies and create recommendations to strengthen them.**
Task Force input was consolidated into twelve major topics and Menti polling was conducted to see which of the topics should be prioritized for 2024 – 2025. Based on the polling, the top three topics were: 1) Improving access to the river edge; 2) Funding (aligning opportunities with investment and resources); and 3) Green Infrastructure and Stormwater Policy.
- **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. Other opportunities may also come up during 2024 and 2025, but this is what is known currently.

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

This goal was part of the small group discussion activity during the September meeting. Key takeaways from the discussion based on what the Task Force could prioritize was summarized and then synthesized into a list of potential topics that the Task Force could explore as part of this goal in 2024 – 2025. This list includes the following topics for exploration:

- Is there project readiness criteria for different government partners?
- How is it determined what projects are prioritized?
- Are there opportunities to improve capital planning and investments across agencies and departments?
 - What are some barriers to coordination?
- Best practices in other places?
- What are the funding opportunities that are available?
- How do you connect components of projects and link them together with other funding opportunities?

This overall list of topics was reviewed by the Task Force’s Steering Committee comprised of all the government partners that participate in the Task Force and facilitated by MPC and Friends of the Chicago River. During the discussion, case studies and examples emerged as ways to organize this work. These case studies connect the goal to work that has been ongoing across Task Force partners over the past few years and provides a manageable way to approach some of the broader topics. Case studies and examples include the following:

- Review opportunity sites identified in the Waterways Restoration Framework Plan study to determine if they are moving forward and their overall priority status as well as project readiness.
- Review examples of projects that have moved forward, like the Wild Mile, to understand and document flow of process.
- Review prioritization tool examples developed by other working groups and understand how well they work with aligning funding.
- Review examples of best practices from other cities/regions.

- **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. In 2024 – 2025 the Task Force will provide development teams with the information that was developed by the System Plans Working Group and the guidelines for the development review process. The Task Force will also track how the group’s feedback has informed changes to development projects.

Short-term Goals 2024-2025 Work Plan Summary

A summary of the work plan approach was presented to highlight the major components of each of the four goals.

Questions / Remarks from Task Force members in response to work plan presentation:

- A member of the Task Force wanted to highlight a best practice in New York City around water management and specifically was interested if there was an incentive or requirement to not contribute to combined sewer overflows as part of river edge development, particularly at the new Lincoln Yards site.
- A member of the Task Force noted that the next steps around the City’s NPDES permit should be added to the stormwater management and river edge group.

- A member of the Task Force asked how some of the work plan devoted to projects and funding opportunities could align with Capital Improvement Planning.

Working Group 2023 Outcomes: System Plans and Development Review

Friends of the Chicago River provided a review of the work that was accomplished this year as part of the Task Force's two working groups: System Plans and Development Review. The System Plans Working Group held three workshops and compiled information on opportunities, constraints, and issues for different river segments. The Development Review Working Group reviewed two projects and created meeting preparation materials for development teams with expectations and guidelines for the development review process. An additional list of 2023 Task Force accomplishments was also presented which included the release of the US Army Corps of Engineers Waterways Restoration Framework Plan and completion of the South Branch Parks Access Study.

Government-led River Focused Projects 2024

The Task Force meeting included presentations from the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) and the Chicago Department of Transportation's consultant team, AECOM, on two key planning initiatives. These two projects were included under Goal #2 in the work plan presentation: the Calumet Design Guidelines and Land Use Update and the Chicago River Edge Access Study.

Luke Mich from DPD provided the planning context and goals of a project to update design guidelines and land use in the Calumet region. This project will officially start after an engagement-focused consultant team is selected at the beginning of 2024. An engagement schedule with the Task Force needs to be thought through as part of the project kick-off.

AECOM provided an update on the City's study of rivers edge access, which officially kicked-off in Fall 2023. Michele Inouye presented project goals, the study area, timeline and their overall approach to the project.

Questions / Remarks from Task Force members in response to project presentations:

- A member of the Task Force asked what the results of the CDOT River Edge Access study would be used for, and it was clarified that it would be for identifying public projects for funding so that when funding is available for project implementation the City would be ready.
- A member of the Task Force asked about whether there was an intent to enter into partnerships with private landowners along the river regarding river edge access. The project team is still developing an approach to that acknowledging that private ownership is a barrier.
- A member of the Task Force asked about the factors included in the susceptibility to change analysis for river edge access. The factors are Tax assessor data, Building age, and Lot coverage.
- A member of the Task Force asked if the CDOT River Edge Access study would help find funds for land easements. Easements will be considered as part of the development opportunity portion of the study.

Members of the Task Force also participated in a lively conversation in the chat about manufactured slips along the South Branch and whether it would be possible for the City to acquire and promote their use for biodiversity.

Update Sustainable Development Policy

The Task Force provided feedback on the City's update to the Sustainable Development policy in 2022. The policy update is still in process and Brad Roback from the Department of Planning and Development presented an update to the Task Force on river-focused policy revisions and the timeline of next steps.

MPC also provided updates on projects led by government partners. These updates are included as part of the overall slide deck for the meeting.

Adjourn and 2024 Task Force Meeting Dates

Upcoming dates for 2024 Task Force meetings were provided to members:

- March 12: 3 pm to 4:30 pm
- June 11: 3 pm to 4:30 pm
- September 17: 3 pm to 4:30 pm
- December 3: 3 pm to 4:30 pm

The meeting concluded at 4:30 pm.