

River Ecology and Governance Task Force

12/07/21

3 pm to 4:30 pm

Meeting Minutes:

### **Welcome and Introductions**

The meeting kicked off at 3 pm with participants saying hi in the chat. Approximately 35 members of the Task Force attended the meeting. The group reviewed the Task Force objectives and short-term goals for 2021 - 2022 as a reminder of what the group is working on collaboratively.

### **End of Year Survey**

Task Force members were asked to take an end of year survey about their experience as members of the Task Force in 2021.

### **Working Group Check-in and Discussion**

#### **System Plans Working Group Check-in and Discussion**

The System Plans working group has had five working group meetings and created a set of draft principles and themes to guide river related land use and development. The working group is determining next steps for 2022.

At the Task Force meeting, the group focused on answering the following question via a Google Jam Board, which captured their individual responses:

- How do we engage with local community organizations and residents about these principles and how they can be enacted in different parts of the river and on different sites? What are some strategies the Working Group could pursue in 2022?

Key takeaways from this discussion included the following:

- Establish and implement engagement principles that acknowledge the current and previous work of community residents and stakeholders. Build trust with communities and be mindful of using existing work and findings rather than asking the same questions. Come prepared and acknowledge and review existing principles and visions for sites to build upon conversations rather than starting new ones.
- Improve communication materials and strategies. There is value in creating culturally appropriate, fun and engaging communications like newsletters, social media, StoryMaps, to share data and information. These tools help get people engaged, provide data, and can be used to solicit neighborhood feedback and input.
- A variety of engagement strategies could be employed. Short engagement surveys may be a helpful way of receiving information. Connect with community groups in the area to bring in local residents and meet them where they are in places like libraries, schools and community spaces. Activities that are active and fun, like canoeing, shrub planting, site visits, can help connect people with their rivers and riverfronts.

#### **Development Review Working Group Check-in and Discussion**

The Development Review working group has hosted six review meetings and has been standardizing their review processes, including the use of a standard review form with questions based around the Design

Guidelines. The working group is determining next steps for 2022 including how the process can become more transparent and how feedback loops with the development teams could be better integrated.

At the Task Force meeting, the group focused on answering the following question via a Google Jam Board, which captured individual responses:

- How can these review processes incorporate the draft principles that have been created by the System Plans Working Group? Are there additional questions that should be asked? Can the principles be provided in advance to the developer team? Other strategies?

Key takeaways from this discussion included the following:

- Clearly delineate the role of the Development Review working group within the overall review structure. Set clear expectations about how input impacts the process and what follow-up strategies are for projects reviewed. Meet earlier in the process and be clear that we do not represent the community's perspective and do not replace a community dialogue.
- Stronger, more robust community and stakeholder feedback loops are needed. Deeper community and stakeholder engagement by the developer in the early stage of the process is needed. It would be helpful to the working group to know how the community feels about the group's comments.
- Changes to different policy processes and practices (Design Guidelines, ordinances, etc.) may be warranted. Consider changes to the Guidelines to more fully incorporate the System Plans working group's principles and themes as well as emphasize river connectivity. Submissions could also be more strongly modeled after the Lakefront Protection ordinance.
- General improvements to the review form and current process. Less, more succinct text with some graphics would help convey information more easily.

### **Partner Led Presentation**

Friends of the Chicago River (Friends) presented an overview of a recently completed initiative to update strategic planning and communications tools focused on the habitat connectivity role of the Chicago River watershed. The primary goal of this project is to better illustrate the relationship of the Chicago River system to the surrounding network of potential biodiversity supporting patches, hubs, and corridors.

In shaping the next set of ambitious goals for the ecological health of the Chicago River system, Friends feels it is important to incorporate network, natural systems, and connectivity thinking using land beyond already protected preserves and parks. The initiative's process included:

- Research into other case studies and strategies for habitat connectivity into a "Framework Plan" document.
- A series of workshops with over 35 experts in urban wildlife science, research, on-the-ground projects, and advocacy to reflect on our collective work, and outline future focus areas, sites, and strategies.
- Creation of new communications and advocacy tools, maps, and resources to support our work.

Project outcomes include:

- Updated system wide strategies and policies to be used in Friends' and our partners' advocacy, education, and on-the-ground work.
- Communications tools, including a "Charismatic Species of Interest" list to broaden understanding of the biodiversity that the river system supports.
- Advocacy tools such as the "Developer Resource Guide" to provide more specific landscape case studies and examples to augment municipal ordinances and guidelines.

- Mapping analysis that illustrates the vast opportunity for a more connected network of upland, riparian, and aquatic habitats including the river system.

The project outcomes, mapping analysis and tools can be found in this [StoryMap](#)

## **2022 Priority Projects and Topics**

Four government stakeholders presented their work plan goals and projects for 2022. They are as follows:

- Department of Planning and Development
  - We Will Chicago citywide plan
  - Southwest Industrial Corridor support services (with CDOT)
  - Far South Industrial Corridor planning (with CDOT)
  - PAS next steps (with other government stakeholders)
- Chicago Department of Transportation
  - Citywide River Edge Access Study
  - South Branch Parks Access Study (with Park District)
  - Riverwalk Extension
  - Southwest Industrial Corridor support services (with DPD)
  - Far South Industrial Corridor planning (with DPD)
- Metropolitan Water Reclamation District
  - Chicago Area Waterway System Phosphorus Assessment and Reduction Plan
  - H2NOW Collaboration
  - Green Infrastructure
  - Streambank Stabilization Projects
- Chicago Park District
  - North Branch Park projects (recreation/restoration)
  - Work at Hegewisch, Big Marsh, Whitford, and Indian Ridge around trails / eco-recreation infrastructure
  - Deadstick Pond restoration
  - SEPA station restoration
  - Mittal Woods

## **Quarterly Topics for Presentation and Discussion**

Previous surveys of the Task Force revealed that members were interested in using the meetings as a shared space for learning. In particular, Task Force members are interested in learning more the following three topics:

- Planning and zoning regulations, processes, permits, and decisions (local, state, federal)
- Community engagement in riverfront planning efforts
- Funding for riverfront projects (local, state, federal)

In 2022, the Task Force meetings will include case study presentations of river and riverfront projects discussing how the projects were implemented across these three topic areas.

## **Proposed 2022 Meeting Dates and Adjourn**

The group was reminded of all the meetings and workshops that had occurred throughout 2021. The proposed dates for the 2022 Task Force meetings were provided to members with a note that calendar invitations for the meeting dates would be sent out before the end of the year. Members who were interested in attending the We Will Meeting-in-a-Box Session focused on the river system were asked to RSVP.

The meeting concluded at 4:32 pm.