



# OUR GREAT RIVERS ACHIEVEMENTS & PRIORITIES 2016 - 2020

GREAT RIVERS CHICAGO



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## ABOUT OUR GREAT RIVERS

Our Great Rivers is a vision for creating a more inviting, productive, and living river system in the city of Chicago, released in 2016 by the City of Chicago, the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), Friends of the Chicago River, and many other partners. More than 6,000 residents provided input to help develop this collective vision. Our Great Rivers defines 26 goals with accompanying action steps for stakeholders to work on collaboratively to improve the Des Plaines, Chicago, and Calumet rivers. Great Rivers Chicago is an initiative to ensure that the Our Great Rivers vision is advanced and stories of progress, change, and challenges are being documented and highlighted.

## PROGRESS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Our Great Rivers was created to spark change in how Chicago residents, stakeholders, and government leaders view the three rivers within the City's borders, the Des Plaines, Chicago, and Calumet Rivers.

This initiative was the first comprehensive vision for Chicago's river system; and imagines a future where our rivers are valued as a cultural asset, similar to Lake Michigan. The river system touches more than 25 Chicago community areas, with the power to be the predominant natural asset within the city, and the ability to positively impact the lives of residents every day. The city and region need their rivers to be ecologically and economically thriving both to collectively form a holistic system and to serve as vibrant neighborhood assets.



River Edge Ideas Lab Concept by James Corner Field Operations

In 2016, the vision laid out goals and action steps to create more inviting, productive, and living rivers. To track progress, 2020, 2030, and 2040 have been designated as milestone years. As one of the stewards of Our Great Rivers, MPC took stock at the end of 2020 to review the outlined goals, document progress, and hear from partners and stakeholders about their goals for the future. 2021 is a very different world than five years ago when Our Great Rivers was released. New leadership across local, state, and federal government creates new opportunities for partnership on initiatives. Most significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that the Chicago region continues to struggle with deeply embedded inequity and that communities rely on the outdoors and natural assets, like their riverfronts, when it is not safe to gather indoors. Open space provides joy and respite during both positive and challenging times, but access remains unequal.

As 2021 begins with this deeper understanding of our need for healthy, vibrant, and safe riverfronts in all our communities, it is important to reset expectations for what can be achieved through coordination and collaboration based on the priorities that partners are working to advance. Our Great Rivers was intended to be iterative and generative, not a static plan that sits on the shelf. This report is a starting point to realigning the work of the many stakeholders who care about Chicago's riverfronts so that efforts are advancing together comprehensively.

This report details the progress that has been made in reaching the goals outlined under the three themes of Inviting, Living, and Productive. For each thematic section, the report provides an overview of how much progress has been made on each broad goal through the use of three colors: green, yellow, or red. Green indicates significant progress, yellow means some progress, and red signifies that no progress has been made. White circles signify areas for deeper collaboration for efforts to succeed. These designations were based on discussions with partners and the results of a survey sent out to stakeholders. Each section also includes more in-depth stories of achievements from various riverfront champions who have been working to advance specific aspects of the overall vision. The report finishes with some overall highlights that do not fall neatly into any one theme, but rather address the need for overall coordination and a systemic approach to planning for Chicago's rivers.

It is our hope that by charting progress, challenges, and priorities, this document can celebrate our accomplishments and help us refine our collective approach to advancing the Our Great Rivers vision.

Cover Photo Credits: Top left: The Riverwalk, Kate Joyce Studio. Top right: Boating in Beaubien Woods, Openlands. Bottom: Lathrop Opening, Metropolitan Planning Council.

For more information about Great Rivers Chicago, contact Christina Harris at [charris@metroplanning.org](mailto:charris@metroplanning.org). Learn more about Great Rivers Chicago and the Our Great Rivers Vision at [www.metroplanning.org](http://www.metroplanning.org).

## INVITING

Our rivers will be inviting: Enhancements to infrastructure, information and programming to make our rivers more intuitive, meaningful, and exciting places to be, drawing more people for recreation, work, and relaxation.

### Goals: Charting Progress

2020	
Activities to Draw People to Our Rivers	
Safe Rivers and Waterfronts	
A Unified Brand and Comprehensive Wayfinding	○
Real Time Water Quality Information	
Water Quality Plans For All River Stretches	
2030	
Continuous Riverfront Trails	○
Easy Access from All Neighborhoods	
Access for People of All Ages and Abilities	
2040	
Fully Litter- and Odor-free Rivers	○

= significant progress
  = some progress
  = no progress
  = deeper collaboration needed

### Highlights from Partners

**Continuous Riverfront Trails:** The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) is making continuous riverfront trails a reality across the city. CDOT completed an implementation study to extend the riverwalk along the South Branch of the Chicago River from Lake Street down to Ping Tom Park in Chinatown. This study is advancing to Phase I Engineering with the ultimate goal of creating a new feasible amenity for residents.



El Paseo Community Council Murals  
Credit: El Paseo Community Garden

Following a trail gap analysis that was conducted by the Department of Planning and Development (DPD), CDOT is also working on a River Edge Access study as part of a framework to complete a continuous riverfront trail system. This study is reviewing access alongside all three rivers, and will include an inventory of conditions to identify trail access issues and challenges, and identify projects for future funding. The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) is providing funding for this study as well as a review of trail connections around South Branch Parks. CDOT also continues with implementing planned projects including completing the 312 River Run and closing the final gap on the six-mile North Shore Channel trail.

**Easy Access from all Neighborhoods:** CDOT's River Edge Access Study will also advance the overall goal of providing more access to the rivers for neighborhoods underserved by access points and trails. In addition to CDOT, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County (FPDCC) has also been hard at work advancing this goal by aligning its investments and practices in Forest Preserve parks in community areas. As part of this effort, FPDCC has made several improvements at Beaubien Woods in Chicago's Calumet region, making the park more accessible to residents. Interpretive signage has been added, in addition to driveway and parking lot improvements. Updates to the boat launch facility are planned as well. FPDCC has also partnered with organizations such as Openlands and the Major Taylor Cycling Club to improve local neighborhood access to the Calumet River system.

Openlands is working on creating and promoting an African American Heritage Water Trail in the Calumet, designed to celebrate the cultural heritage of the area and make new connections from the neighborhood to the river by using CDOT right-of-ways. The Major Taylor Cycling Club has developed a concept for increased signage and wayfinding across the Major Taylor Trail, including art, programming, and an overlook above the river.

### Achievements Snapshot

- More than 5,000 people participated in events led by Our Great Rivers grantees
- 400 percent increase in events along Riverwalk
- Installation of Native American effigy mounds in Schiller Woods, the first known installation in North America since the establishment of the U.S.
- New murals along the Little Calumet River and the South Branch of the Chicago River. The Major Taylor Trail mural along the Calumet River received the American Trails 2019 Trails and the Arts Award
- Development of the South Branch Parks Framework Plan and Priorities Report
- Chicago Department of Transportation-led River Edge Access Study and South Branch Parks Feasibility Study
- Friends of Chicago River guided more than 5,900 people on river canoe trips
- Forest Preserve District of Cook County-led planning and implementation of improvements to the Des Plaines River Trail
- Multiple portions of the Cal-Sag Trail along the Little Calumet River are being reviewed by or in scope of various public agencies for planning and construction
- Forest Preserve District of Cook County improved community assets and access to Beaubien Woods
- Creation of African-American Heritage Water Trail in the Little Calumet River
- Chicago Department of Planning and Development-adopted Chicago River Brand Standards and Guidelines, a comprehensive branding strategy for new planned developments along the Chicago River
- Chicago Department of Transportation-led South Branch Riverwalk implementation study
- Friends of the Chicago River engaged more than 24,000 volunteers in natural areas restoration projects
- Annual Blue Island Dragon Boat Festival along the Cal-Sag
- **Wild Mile river park** in planning and design phase in the Chicago River's North Branch. Recipient of a 2019 Strategic Plan Award from Illinois Chapter of the American Planning Association
- H2NOW project testing out water quality sensors in all three branches of the Chicago River
- Friends of Chicago River launched the Litter Free Chicago River initiative with more than 50 partners
- Multiple boat tours of the Chicago and Calumet Rivers sponsored by Wendella



Active Use of the Riverfront at Ewing and 95th  
Credit: Julia Hunter, Work2gether4peace

## PRODUCTIVE

Our rivers will be productive: They have historically been and will continue to be working rivers that are transportation arteries, commercial corridors, and tourism generators.

### Goals: Charting Progress

#### 2020

New Visions for Modern Working Rivers	
New Tools to Support Riverfront Productivity	

#### 2030

A Clear Path Forward for the Port District	
Integrated Transit on Land and Water	
Local Tourism and Jobs	
Iconic Riverfront Destinations	
Productive Use (and Reuse) of Water	

#### 2040

Revitalized and Reimagined Infrastructure	
-------------------------------------------	--

= significant progress
  = some progress
  = no progress
  = deeper collaboration needed

### Highlights from Partners

**New Visions for Modern Working Rivers:** The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) started a planning process to review and recommend land use changes for Chicago's industrial corridors to better align with community visions and future needs. This process kicked-off with the North Branch Framework Plan, which resulted in changes to zoning and use designations within the North Branch Industrial Corridor. From this plan, several new developments are taking shape. DPD also conducted a planning process for the Little Village Industrial Corridor. The overall plan is still in draft form.

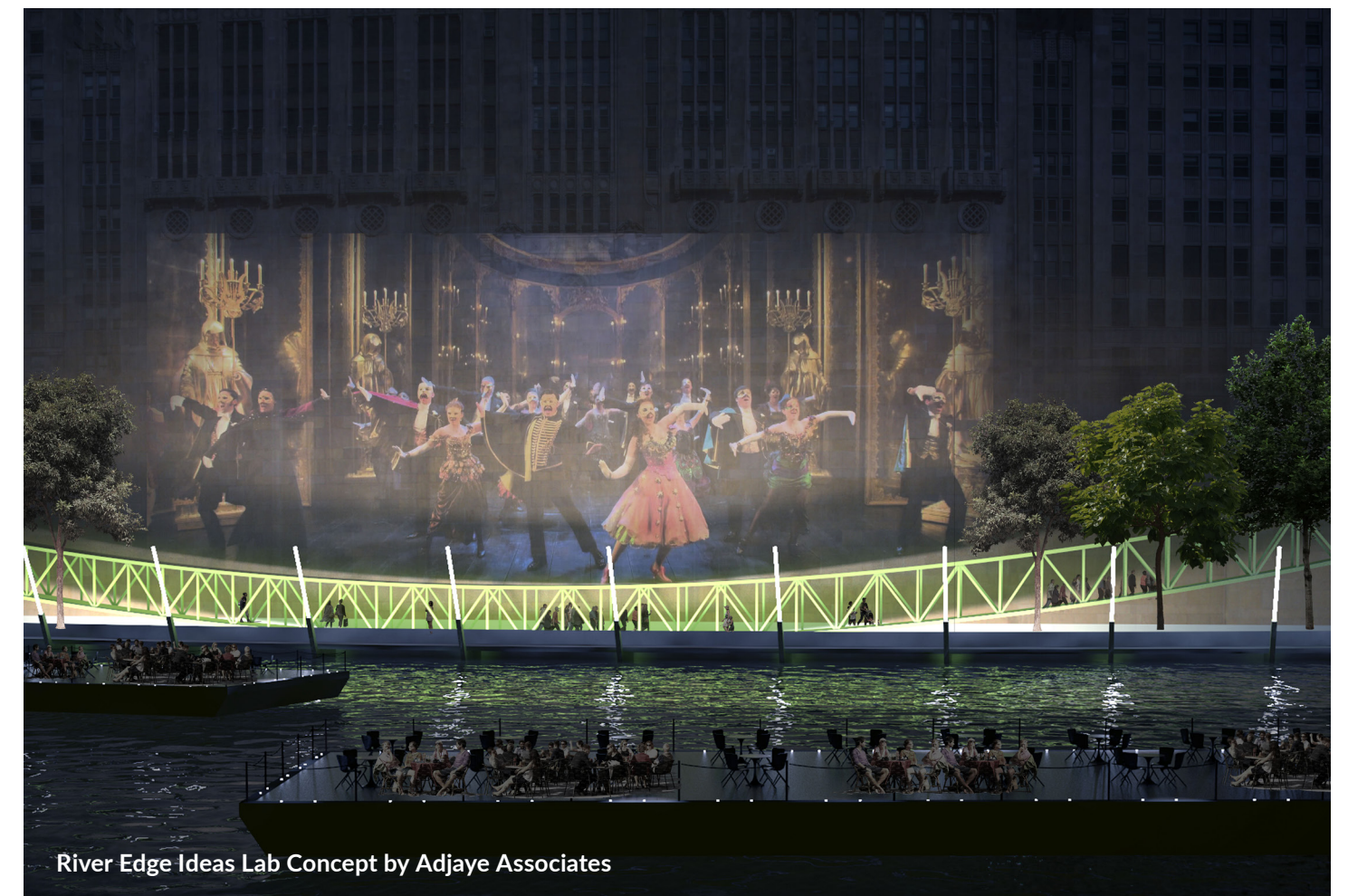


Most significantly, the learnings from these two riverfront planning processes are informing the way that DPD is approaching land use planning for the Calumet Industrial Corridor. The Calumet Connect, a collective of community and civic partners, is providing qualitative and quantitative data and research on the public health impacts of the Calumet Industrial Corridor to help guide decision-making for land use and zoning changes. Centering the start of the process around an understanding of the health and quality of life implications of industrial uses for residents and workers in the Corridor should lead to a planning approach that balances health and economic development needs. The goal is to use research to help produce better outcomes for the community as a whole.

**A Clear Path Forward for the Port District:** Our Great Rivers articulated a need to promote and balance local industrial, environmental, and community needs and priorities with planning efforts. As part of this, the Illinois International Port District (IIPD) is working with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning to create a master plan for its facilities on Lake Calumet and at the mouth of the Calumet River. The purpose of the master plan is to provide a clear vision for how the Port should develop and use its facilities and land through 2050 with input from communities and stakeholders. The plan, which will be executed by IIPD and multiple government partners, will include strategies to reinvest in the Port's central purpose as a modern, productive waterfront that promotes environmental stewardship and provides community amenities.

## Achievements Snapshot

- Industrial Corridor Modernization planning led by Chicago Department of Planning and Development to create revised land use plans, several of which are located along the Chicago and Calumet rivers
- A Data Book providing public health data for the Calumet Industrial Corridor was created to inform its industrial corridor land use planning
- Peer exchange with leaders from other cities hosted in 2017 to learn about riverfront development incentives
- University of Chicago students researched and provided recommendations on incentives and governance structures for riverfront management
- More than \$2 million in Open Space Impact fees used in service of river-related projects, like the River Edge Access Study and Wild Mile
- Illinois International Port District Master Plan underway, led by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and funded by Illinois Department of Transportation
- Self-guided digital tourism app being developed for a section of Irving Park Road to connect different cultural touch points and connect the Chicago River to the Des Plaines River
- Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago pilot to use effluent water in manufacturing process
- River Edge Ideas Lab exhibition was featured as part of the 2017 Architecture Biennial, with nine design firms proposing new visions for the river edge to transform spaces into iconic destinations



## LIVING

Our rivers will be living: From riverbeds to shorelines, plants, animals, and people will co-exist in vibrant healthy ecosystems.

### Goals: Charting Progress

2020	
Active Stewardship of Every Park and Preserve	
Ecologically Sensitive Shoreline Development	
Aggressive Management of Invasive Species	
Expanded Chicago Park District Natural Areas	
2030	
Our Rivers as Parks	
Expanded Preserves and Parks	
Coordinated Prevention of Water Pollution	○
Rivers We Can Swim In	
2040	
Thriving River Ecosystems	

= significant progress
  = some progress
  = no progress
  = deeper collaboration needed

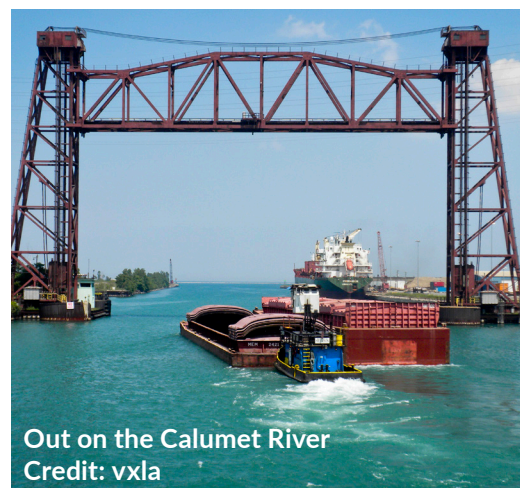
### Highlights from Partners

**Coordinated Prevention of Water Pollution:** The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) has piloted disinfection treatment technologies at its O'Brien and Calumet plants and the results from this work have been promising. A study by Argonne National Laboratory and the University of Chicago, reviewed the microbiome of the Chicago Area Waterways System before and after the disinfection technology came online. The study found evidence of more diverse bacterial communities in the Cal-Sag Channel, which is consistent with a healthier ecosystem and less water pollution.

Additionally, the McCook reservoir became active in 2017, which increased the capacity of Chicago region to capture stormwater during major storm events, resulting in less combined sewer overflows (CSOs). Reducing CSOs results in improved water quality as part of MWRD's overall efforts.

**Aggressive Management of Invasive Species:** Following the Great Lakes and Mississippi River Interbasin Study (GLMRIS) released in January 2014 and with input from the Chicago Area Waterway System Advisory Committee, the GLMRIS-Brandon Road Final Integrated Feasibility Study and Environmental Impact Statement was released in 2019. This recommended plan, completed by the Army Corps of Engineers, evaluated the potential control options and technologies for the Brandon Road Lock and Dam site, located in Will County, to mitigate the movement of aquatic non-natives species into the Great Lakes. This report proposed a recommended alternative that integrated multiple technological measures.

In late December 2020, the Army Corps of Engineers and State of Illinois, serving as the non-federal sponsor, finalized an agreement to complete Pre-Construction Engineering and Design for this project, officially announcing the partnership in early 2021. This agreement includes cost-sharing and collaboration with Michigan. If all goes as planned, design will take an estimated three to four years to complete.



Out on the Calumet River  
Credit: vxla



Walk through Beaubien Woods  
Credit: Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture

### Achievements Snapshot

- Park District acquisition of Mittal Woods and SEPA 1 with goals for conservation and recreation
- Funding and intergovernmental agreement approved for Pre-Construction Engineering and Design for Brandon Road Lock and Dam to halt movement of aquatic invasive species
- Friends of the Des Plaines River Group started by the Active Transportation Alliance
- Disinfection treatment technologies and O'Brien and Calumet plants are improving health of aquatic communities
- A connection was restored to 2.2 miles of waterway through improvements to Mill Creek, a project led by Friends of the Chicago River
- Stormwater capture ability increased through the McCook Reservoir, helping to improve water quality
- Dam removal by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Chicago Park District, and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago along the North Branch of Chicago River in addition to shoreline rehabilitation is improving passage of fish species and recreational use
- Friends of the Chicago River installed four bat condos and three osprey nesting platforms
- Authorized plans by Congress in late 2020 for restoration work of Bubbly Creek
- Department of Planning and Development update to Chicago River Design Guidelines adopted by Plan Commission in 2019
- Illinois Department of Natural Resources created incentive program for the capture of Asian Carp by commercial fishing
- Friends of the Chicago River completed 197 acres in land restoration work along the river system and its tributaries
- Building Better Beaubien draft plan creates a vision for the Altgeld Gardens Beaubien Woods area
- Conservation Action Plan for the Little Calumet River creating a framework for the potential restoration of habitat and river ecology
- Watershed plans developed for Little Calumet River, Cal-Sag Channel, Poplar Creek, and the Des Plaines River to meet criteria and be eligible for project grant funding from Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's Section 319 program
- Wild Mile project in the North Branch of the Chicago River piloting in-stream habitat

## ADVANCING A SYSTEM-WIDE APPROACH

Great Rivers Chicago, and its more than 60 partners, was awarded the Implementation Award in 2018 from the American Planning Association's Illinois Chapter. The award recognizes the collective hard work toward implementing goals from Our Great Rivers. Much of this progress has been documented under each of the distinct themes of Inviting, Productive, and Living. In addition to these individual goals, there have also been major accomplishments on collaborations, policy, planning, and projects toward creating a holistic view of Chicago's rivers. These achievements also deserve recognition for developing frameworks, venues, and dedicated funding streams to advance a more comprehensive approach to activating the collective potential of our rivers and riverfronts.

### U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Restoration (USACE) Framework Plan

In 2020, the USACE entered into a partnership agreement with DPD, Chicago Park District, FPDC, and MWRD to develop a Chicago Rivers Restoration Framework Plan. The study will include an inventory of existing conditions, determine restoration potential and environmental impacts, and identify new and existing project opportunities. Ultimately, this plan will help develop a list of funding-ready projects for the Chicago river system.

### River Ecology and Governance Task Force

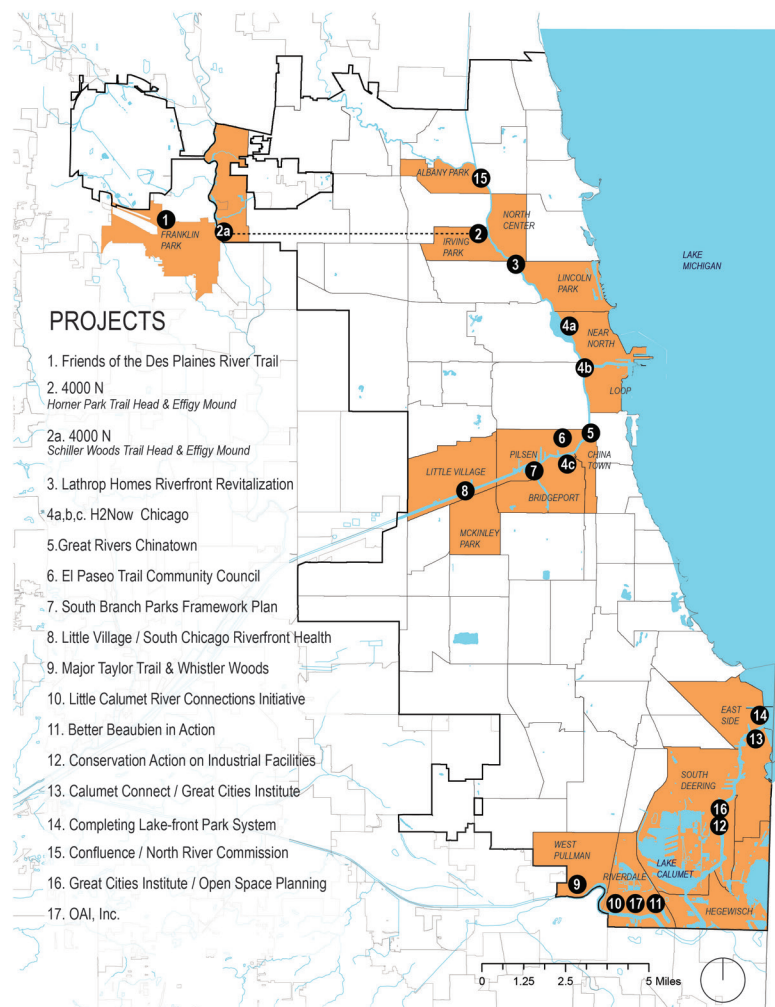
Former Mayor Rahm Emanuel kicked off 2019 with an Executive Order creating the Chicago River Ecology and Governance Task Force (Task Force). This Task Force was an outgrowth of the Implementation Committee started in 2016 after the release of the Our Great Rivers vision. In 2019, the Task Force had great success in beginning to set up a structure that included working groups, expanding membership, and providing participants with a public health training, that helps them think about the river from a human health perspective. The Task Force currently consists of local, state and federal government agencies, civic and community organizations, and local institutions. At the end of 2020, the Task Force reconvened to start refining goals and priorities for the group for 2021 and beyond.

### The Chicago Community Trust: Our Great Rivers Grant Funding for Neighborhood Projects

In 2017, The Chicago Community Trust began making grants to community-led riverfront projects on all three of Chicago's rivers. These projects span planning and programming; demonstrate alignment with the Inviting, Productive, and Living themes of the Our Great Rivers vision; and use the river system as a catalyst for equitable community development.

These projects have creative and unique approaches to river activation and reveal a hunger for access and cultural inclusion along the riverfronts. They have successfully created new partnerships, engaged residents and visitors, and made the rivers true community assets. To date, the Trust has supported 19 initiatives that collectively have achieved a number of milestones:

- More than \$1.5 million dollars in additional investment in our rivers has been leveraged
- More than 100 rivers-related events and programs took place
- More than 5,000 people have been engaged in rivers-related events, webinars, surveys, and more
- More than 130 partners across the region have actively supported these projects



## ONWARD OUR GREAT RIVERS

A tremendous amount of progress has been accomplished over the past four years in achieving the Our Great Rivers vision. Much work remains, but it is clear that there is sustained momentum to continue advancing the established goals, as well as incorporating new goals into the vision. Conversations MPC had with government stakeholders and project partners in late 2020, along with the survey results from members of the River Ecology and Governance Task Force, have helped to identify various emergent collective priorities. From these touch points, a few goals from Our Great Rivers stood out for deeper collaboration:

- Inviting: A unified brand and comprehensive wayfinding
- Inviting: Continuous riverfront trails
- Inviting: Fully litter- and odor-free rivers
- Living: Coordinated prevention of water pollution

Discussions and the survey also revealed additional issues, challenges, and opportunities that have grown more prominent since Our Great Rivers was released in 2016. The following goals should be integrated into this collaborative work:

- Understanding the impacts of land use, habitat, and water quality from a public health perspective, and creating and using health related data and metrics to guide river related decisions
- Partnering with schools and other programs on outdoor education that focuses on river ecology
- Creating a project prioritization system that considers equity and aligns potential funding to ensure projects can be completed
- Emphasizing involved community engagement and participation for access to and use of land that is owned by public entities
- Integrating comprehensive planning for Chicago's rivers into citywide planning effort: We Will Chicago
- Increasing opportunities for plant and animal habitats within the Chicago river system



The River Ecology and Governance Task Force offers a strong framework for partners to align and work together to advance goals from Our Great Rivers as well as integrate new priorities. Success is dependent on achieving genuine, robust partnerships amongst stakeholders in the Chicago region. The Task Force is an opportunity to do just that by providing the space for collaboration, discussion, and collective decision-making. Much has been accomplished in a relatively short time period due to the dedication and hard work of many, many partners. MPC looks forward to seeing what we can all get done together in the next five years.

# GREAT RIVERS CHICAGO



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