



SOUTH BRANCH RIVER TRAIL PRIORITIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

METROPOLITAN PLANNING COUNCIL | SOUTH BRANCH PAC | CANNONDESIGN
ACTIVE TRANS | FRIENDS OF THE CHICAGO RIVER | SMITHGROUP

2018

A Priorities Document For: The City of Chicago’s departments concerned with riverfront planning, development, and programming; elected officials representing the neighborhoods along the South Branch of the Chicago River, business owners, real-estate and housing developers, local nonprofits and advocacy organizations, trail planners and advocates, environmental advocates, educators, and community members.

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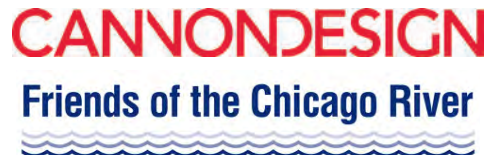
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Community partners: Benito Juarez Community Academy, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Burroughs Elementary School, McKinley Park Development Council

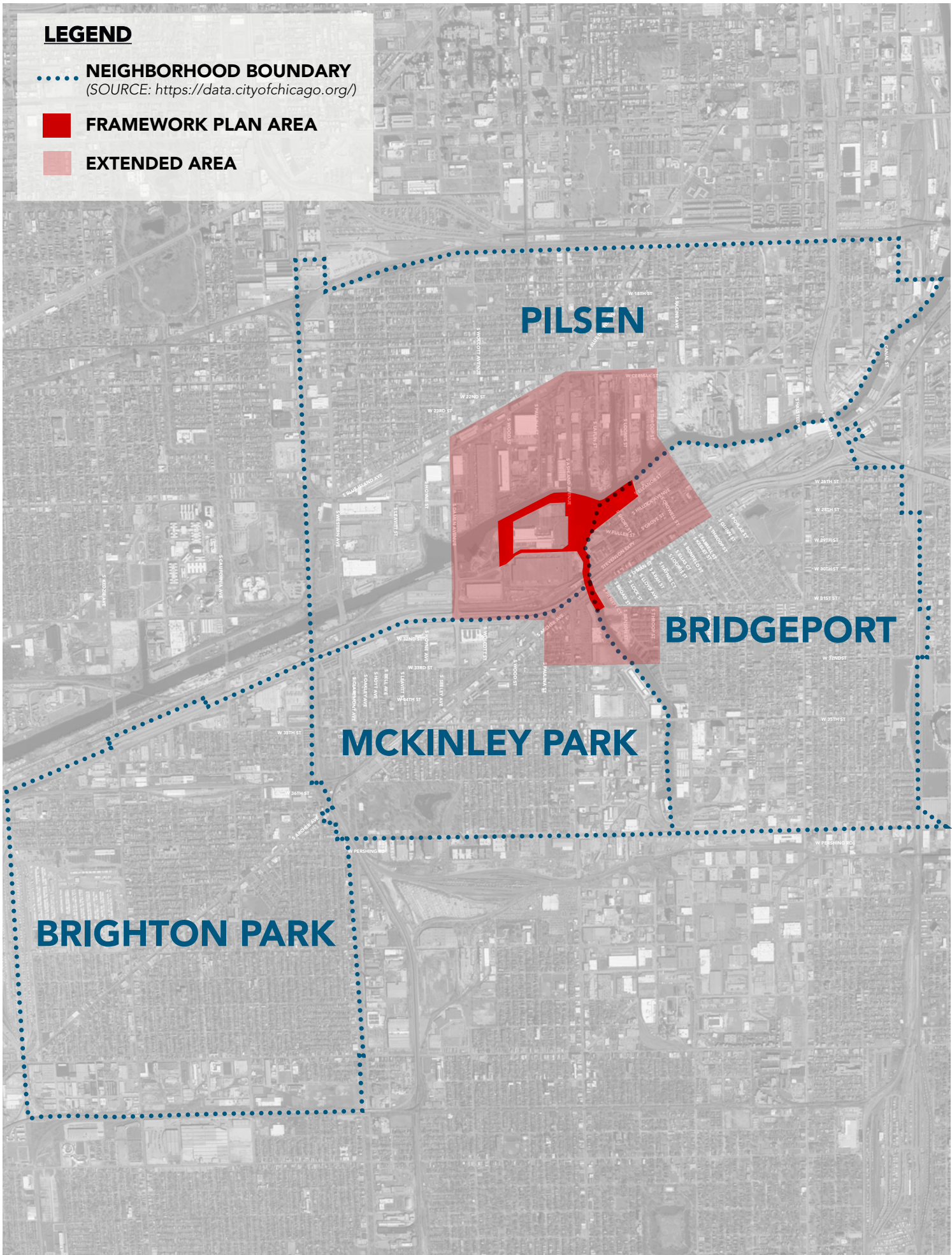
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LEGEND

- NEIGHBORHOOD BOUNDARY
(SOURCE: <https://data.cityofchicago.org/>)
- FRAMEWORK PLAN AREA
- EXTENDED AREA



Executive Summary



“If that is part of the plan – providing jobs, skills and entrepreneurship opportunities to the community, then local folks would be all in. Here's an opportunity to build your experience — take what I made and put back into the community. This is what an economic engine should look like.” - SGA Youth and Family Services, Brighton Park

Introduction

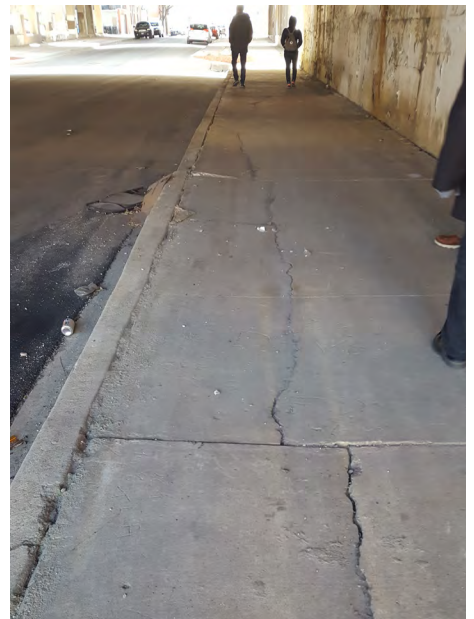
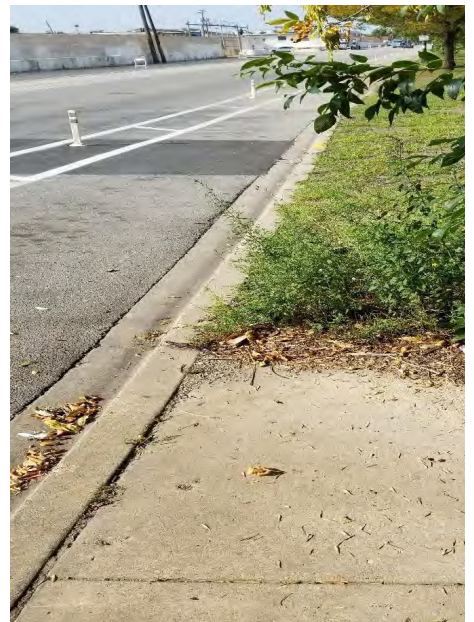
The Executive Summary of the South Branch River Trail Priorities Report documents community priorities, opportunities, and concerns as it relates to riverfront access and a future riverfront trail in Bridgeport, Pilsen, McKinley Park, and Brighton Park. It contains a brief description of the purpose and methodology of the project and the major recommendations from these four communities.

The full South Branch River Trail Priorities Report, which will be provided to relevant City departments, fully documents background research on the existing conditions of the four communities and elaborates further upon the project’s engagement process, results, and recommendations.

The South Branch Parks Framework Plan, a complementary and standalone product developed by the South Branch Park Advisory Council and SmithGroup under the same project funding as this Priorities report, puts forth recommendations for connecting Park 571, Canal Origins Park, Canalport Riverwalk, and the surrounding communities through infrastructure, programming, and amenities. It includes input from not only immediate Bridgeport residents, but also residents of Pilsen, McKinley Park, Brighton Park, and beyond.

The priorities, concerns, and recommendations presented in this report should be considered in conjunction with existing and ongoing planning efforts in the communities of focus and across the city of Chicago.

Walk Audit Photos



Planning Background

In 2015, the Metropolitan Planning Council, Friends of the Chicago River, the City of Chicago and many partners began a public outreach process to develop a comprehensive vision for the future of Chicago's rivers. Over the course of 18 months, more than 6,000 Chicagoans participated in developing the vision: *Our Great Rivers*, which was released in August 2016. The vision articulates a desire for Chicago's rivers to be inviting, living, and productive. People want rivers that are easy to access, clean, and provide opportunities for jobs.

Our Great Rivers calls for a continuous riverfront trail by 2030. In 2016, the Active Transportation Alliance released the Chicago River Trail Action Plan to highlight the opportunity to develop a 27-mile trail network for walkers, runners, and cyclists. The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) is currently studying the feasibility of extending a riverfront trail from Lake St. (the current extent of the downtown Riverwalk) to Ping Tom Park. The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) is creating updated riverfront development guidelines that will shape the future of riverfront development for decades to come. DPD is also moving through an Industrial Corridor Modernization process which will ultimately update many of the riverfront industrial corridors.

As the City of Chicago moves toward the goal of a continuous riverfront trail by 2030, the neighborhoods on the South Branch of the Chicago river are naturally next in line to be connected via trail, due to their proximity to downtown, potential for connections to the I & M Canal Trail to the South, and other improvements and investments already coming to the area, such as the Throop St. park and El Paseo trail. Although the network of river trails continues to grow, the South Branch has the largest remaining gap: the five miles between Ping Tom Park and Western Ave.

In preparation for a future riverfront trail plan extending through the South Branch of the Chicago River, a group of partners including MPC, the South Branch Park Advisory Council (SB PAC), Friends, the Active Transportation Alliance (Active Trans), Cannon Design's Open Hand Studio (Cannon), and Smith Group JJR (SmithGroup) began documenting the priorities of four communities along this geography: Bridgeport, Pilsen, McKinley Park and Brighton Park.

The goals of this project were to understand priorities, barriers, and opportunities to connect residents to their river and report river trail priorities that align with *Our Great Rivers* and inform future planning of a fully accessible river and river trail in order to enrich the local community's relationship with the Chicago River's South Branch.

The project also included the parallel components of building local capacity through coalitions and working in partnership with the South Branch Park Advisory Council to develop the South Branch Parks Framework Plan to connect and activate the three existing riverfront parks in Bridgeport and Pilsen. The Framework Plan is an example of the type of local plan that each community deserves to be able to use to advocate for its needs and goals as it relates to riverfront uses.

"The park spaces aren't claimed yet, they don't have their own flavor yet." The Resurrection Project, Pilsen



STAY CONNECTED TO YOUR PARKS & COMMUNITIES...



...WITH THESE UPCOMING EVENTS

Walk Audit Training – April 7th.

Help guide your neighbors toward a better pedestrian experience by hosting a walk audit. Email Chloe Gurin-Sands if you'd like to participate (cgurinsands@metroplanning.org)

Canoe trips - May (5/19 and 5/26) and June (6/7 and 6/12).

Interested in experiencing your neighborhood from the water? Friends of the Chicago River will be leading canoe trips in May and June. These trips will leave from the Eleanor Street Boathouse at Park 571. Space is limited, please contact John Quail to register: jquail@chicagoriver.org

South Branch PAC Summer Party - June 2.

Join us for a day of fun at the parks. Paddling, pedaling, and other fun riverfront activities. For more information, contact SouthBranchPAC@gmail.com.

South Branch Riverfront Parks & Trail Survey.

Provide your feedback with our quick online survey <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SouthBranchRiver>



THE CHICAGO
COMMUNITY TRUST
AND AFFILIATES

Metropolitan Planning Council



ACTIVE
TRANSPORTATION
ALLIANCE

Friends
of the
Chicago
River

SMITHGROUP JJR CANNON DESIGN

Methods

The project team used the following methods to gain insights into the four communities, understand local priorities, barriers, and opportunities, and build local capacity:

- A. Literature review and data analysis to understand existing conditions in terms of demographics, housing, economic and job statistics, ecology and environment, and health outcomes.
- B. Stakeholder interviews (24) to understand local priorities and concerns from the perspective of local organizations, elected officials, and the businesses community.
- C. Visioning Events (3) with station activities to solicit opinions on access, connectivity, programming.
- D. Paddling excursions (5) to give participants a view of the area from the water and solicit feedback around ecology and water quality. Bike ride (1) to give participants the experience of cycling in the area and to solicit feedback around cycling infrastructure
- E. Walk audits (16 routes) conducted by community partners to pinpoint specific connectivity, access, and transportation concerns, and a debrief session (1) to get further feedback about overarching themes in concerns and priorities.
- F. Survey (209 responses) in English and Spanish to get general resident input on transportation, connectivity, access, safety, and a desire for a riverfront trail.

In total, 750 people were engaged and gave feedback throughout the course of the project. The project team analyzed the data gathered through the aforementioned methods using four major themes:

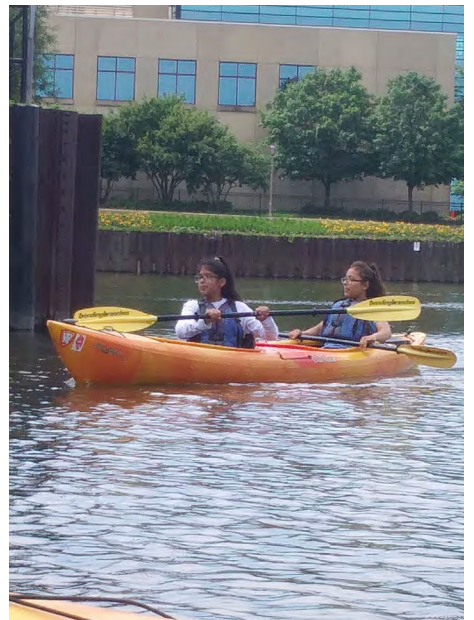
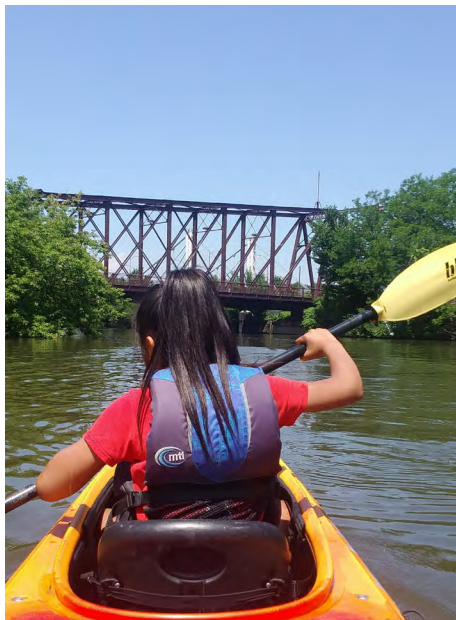
- **Public health and safety**
- **Economic development**
- **Sustainable development**
- **Arts and culture.**

These themes are the focus areas of the Chicago Community Trust's *Our Great Rivers* RFP, under which this project was funded, and align as overarching categories by which to organize the themes that naturally emerged from public outreach.

“[Many residents] will never use the downtown riverwalk, shop in that area, or feel comfortable there. It would be awesome to have a taste of that in these communities.” - Esperanza Health, Little Village



Riverfront Activity Photos



Summary of Results

Within the framework of the four themes, priorities and concerns were identified through the various methods of stakeholder engagement. While these priorities and concerns are gathered by theme, many fall within multiple themes. The project team has created a matrix of recommendations which future planning efforts should address. The recommendations include specific physical and programmatic interventions as well as strategies for engagement around identified concerns.

The five most frequently mentioned ideas across the stakeholder interviews were:

1. **Community building, placemaking, and social cohesion**
2. **Infrastructure, especially for transportation**
3. **Public Health and Safety**
4. **Environmental Stewardship & Sustainable Development**
5. **Economic Development**

The process for moving forward further engagement and development, specifically the need to center local priorities, came across strongly in the public feedback. In fact, while the majority of the people who gave feedback did agree that a riverfront trail could be beneficial to the focus communities, many qualified their support based on doubts about equity, community connections, and the ability to protect and build local wealth. On the survey, over 15% of participants did not believe that a riverfront trail could strengthen local business or increase social connections between neighborhoods.

**“What does this [riverfront amenity] really do for us as an under-resourced community hub? Will we get more sponsorships? Grants?”
- Rauner YMCA, Pilsen**

Public Health & Safety

Priorities:

- Develop community ownership & stewardship to prevent crime and increase usage
- Spaces for local families
- Support active physical activities to decrease chronic conditions like obesity
- Passive and calming spaces
- Safe access to the parks

Concerns:

- Traffic speed and volume for pedestrian safety
- Adequate lighting for pedestrian safety
- Violence and physical markers of gangs



Sustainable Development

Priorities:

- Balance economic opportunity with ecological regeneration
- Increase accessible green space
- Stewardship opportunities
- Environmental justice
- Improve water quality to draw people to the river
- Opportunities for habitat for native animal and plant species
- Businesses that balance economic and environmental priorities and use or promote green methods and materials

Concerns:

- Current pollution and water quality from historical uses and current dumping
- Water quality for human interaction
- Safe access to the waterway for rowers, paddlers, recreational boaters, barge traffic

Arts & Culture

Priorities:

- Multicultural event spaces
- Opportunities for public art installations and programming
- Opportunity to feature local artists
- Opportunity to co-create the character of the newer parks which are still largely undefined

Concerns:

- Lack of cultural representation in programming as a barrier to diversity in park usage.

“One day, people can walk to the river and contemplate life, but now they need a job and places to live.” - The Resurrection Project, Pilsen

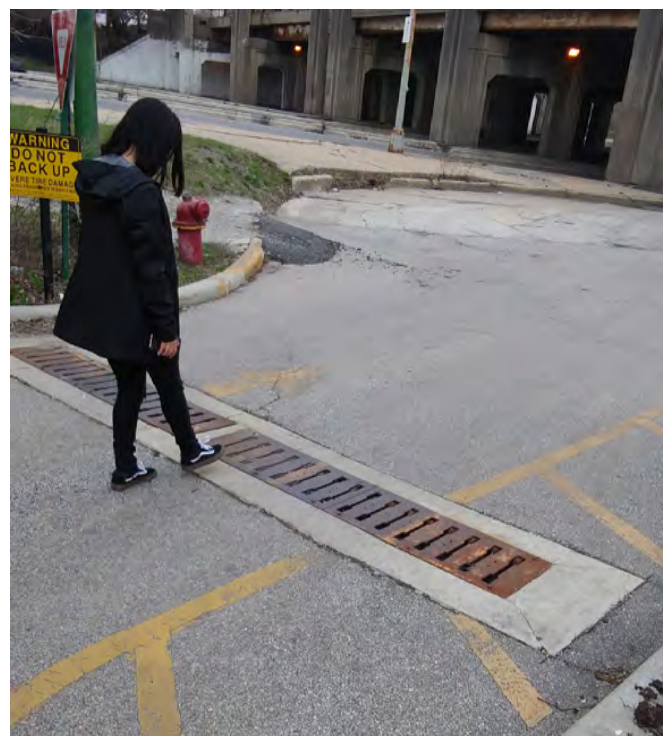
Economic Development

Priorities:

- Businesses that balance economic and environmental priorities and use or promote green methods and materials
- Multicultural event spaces
- Increased exposure for neighborhood businesses and cultural attractions
- Creation of local wealth
- Programming that attracts locals and visitors
- Education and employment pathways

Concerns:

- The parks are disconnected from transit, hard to get to, and feel isolated
- The parks are unknown and have low visibility
- A lack of long-term maintenance such as litter, deteriorating infrastructure
- Doubts about how riverfront improvements will benefit an under-resourced community
- Doubt that a trail can achieve connections between neighborhoods or increase local wealth
- Residential and economic displacement
- Perception of historic lack of investment is a social barrier to community use and involvement



Recommendations

	PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY	SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT	ARTS & CULTURE	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
1. Safer pedestrian crossings and bike lanes	●	●		●
2. Safer sidewalks through improved lighting and visibility	●			●
3. Foster ownership over infrastructure and places	●	●	●	●
4. Advisory structures for sustained maintenance				●
5. Design spaces that cater to families	●	●	●	●
6. Understand air quality risks from nearby industry	●	●		
7. Include habitat spaces as part of trail design		●		●
8. Aesthetically pleasing water quality infrastructure		●		
9. Offer stewardship and nature-related activities		●		●
10. Center environmental justice and counter perception of exclusively industrial use	●	●		
11. Incorporate multicultural public art into the trail design	●		●	
12. Build upon existing community-centered aesthetics			●	
13. Design the space for all ages and abilities	●		●	
14. Flexible, multi-purpose indoor and outdoor space			●	●
15. Culturally relevant and diverse programming			●	
16. Broaden advertisement (multi-lingual, multiple types, across many neighborhoods)			●	●
17. Multi-modal access	●			●
18. Provide major access points to river at Halsted, Ashland, Damen and Pulaski	●			●
19. Improve wayfinding and signage to the riverfront parks	●		●	●
20. Incentivize businesses to embrace the river		●		●
21. Protect local business to prevent displacement	●	●		●
22. New development should include community benefits agreements	●			●
23. Incorporate youth employment strategies in development	●			●
24. Partnerships for educational programming	●		●	●
25. Riverfront multi-purpose family/youth center	●	●	●	●
26. Work with developers to build more affordable housing	●			●
27. Measure and track displacement risk	●			●

Recommendations

Public Health and Safety:

1. Improve pedestrian and cyclist safety by creating safer pedestrian crossings including better signage, pedestrian crossings, and designated bike lanes.
2. Improve pedestrian safety by improving lighting and visibility on sidewalks
3. Work with the community to foster ownership over infrastructure and places
4. Budget for and create advisory structures for sustained maintenance of community assets after investment
5. Design spaces that cater to families
6. The City should work with the Chicago Department of Public Health, civic, and environmental groups to fully understand air and soil quality and other environmental risks from nearby industry

Sustainable Development:

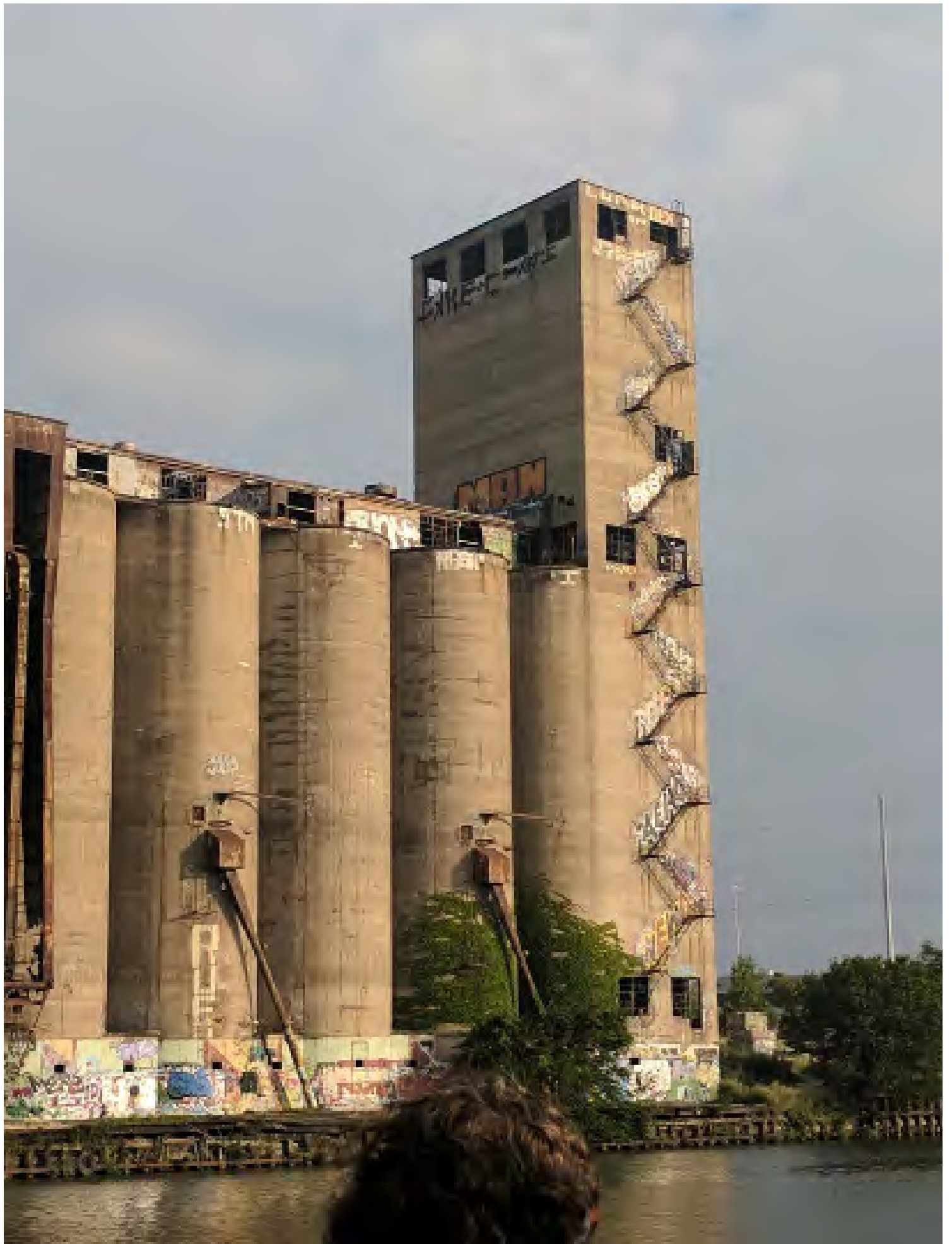
7. Design a trail that includes habitat spaces, not only transportation-focused
8. Design aesthetically pleasing water quality infrastructure, such as waterfalls for aeration
9. Offer stewardship and nature-related activities (e.g. birding, nature walks) at all three parks
10. In development conversations, the City should center environmental justice and challenge the perception that this geography should only be industrial, in order to engage community members

“The community would embrace the creation of more green spaces [but] perceptions about water quality are a significant barrier to seeing the river as a destination.”
- El Paseo Community Garden, Pilsen

Arts and Culture:

11. Incorporate multicultural public art into the trail design
12. Riverfront trail improvements should build upon existing art aesthetics and community-centered activations
13. Design the space for all ages and abilities, including benches, spaces for children, etc.
14. Flexible, multi-purpose indoor and outdoor spaces
15. Culturally relevant, diverse, and inclusive programming
16. Broaden advertisement and branding to reach more nearby communities (e.g. multi-lingual, online and print, further geographic reach)





Economic Development:

17. Improve access by public transportation by placing new divvy stations near the parks and investigating the feasibility of a water-taxi stop at or near Park 571
18. Improve pedestrian and cyclist safety by creating safer pedestrian crossings including better signage, pedestrian crossings, and designated bike lanes.
19. Build access points to the river at all major intersections (Halsted, Ashland, Damen, Pulaski).
20. Pedestrian and bicycle improvements to Archer Avenue, which could be an on-street connection for the Chicago River Trail and developed as a commercial corridor.
21. Place directional signage on major roads and in neighborhoods to guide people to the riverfront parks
22. Support businesses that embrace the river by creating economic incentives that negate the price of environmental remediation and improvement for the public where service access is not needed
23. The Department of Planning and Development should utilize zoning and industrial corridors to strategically protect local businesses that communities support (e.g. food incubation) and prevent economic and residential displacement
24. Prior to and as trail planning begins, the City should: a) work closely with affordable housing developers to build more affordable housing in areas affected by the trail, and implement policies to maintain naturally occurring affordable housing; b) work closely with civic, academic and other organizations to measure, track, and understand the risk for residential displacement
25. Civic, academic, and other organizations should work in partnership with the community to measure, track and prepare for the impact of development
26. New developments should establish community benefits agreements that include agreements for local employment
27. Public and private trail development should incorporate youth employment strategies into the design of the trail by incentivizing the hire of local youth within vendors, construction, etc. as the trail develops
28. Budget for and create advisory structures for sustained maintenance of community assets after investment
29. The Park District should strengthen partnerships with local schools for educational programming
30. Explore opportunities to expand available, or create new multi-purpose and multicultural space for community, family and youth activities on the riverfront

“Riverfront amenities would drive tourism and job creation, however, [they] must be accompanied by a real investment in the local community, not just a token investment.” - El Valor, Pilsen