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THE CHICAGO RIVER CHALLENGE: Solutions for Chicago River Pollution

Sierra Club Vision

The Sierra Club is striving to create a multitude of uses for the Chicago River system that will maximize the opportunities for recreation and for fish and wildlife habitat. Changes can occur in a variety of ways, and addressing them at any public hearing can help a transformation of the Chicago Rivers happen rapidly. Sierra Club has developed a vision to provide an overall beneficial ecological and recreational solution.



Young citizens exploring the Little Calumet River

The North Shore Channel

Currently, the Skokie River north of the Northside sewage plant along McCormick Boulevard is stagnant water that has an odor during parts of the year. Pollution and effluent are the main culprits. Because of the high organic matter content, this area is prime habitat for disease carriers such as mosquitoes—a potential West Nile Virus carrier.

The Sierra Club solution is to modify some or all of the North Shore Channel to wetlands, prairies, and a stream suitable for canoes or paddleboats.

This is beneficial for a number of reasons. If the channel is turned into

a stream with connected wetland habitat, a new refuge for wildlife by providing food and protection for aquatic organisms is created. Along streams and rivers, restored area can be managed to provide spawning and fish rearing areas. Additionally, wetlands offer excellent habitat for shorebirds and waders, such as herons and egrets. Some or all of the banks could be altered into parkland for the local community with publicly owned lands landscaped to include native species especially useful to migrant and nesting song bird species.

More importantly, wetland habitat fights pollution by acting as an additional nutrient treatment for the

wastewater treatment plant effluent. It serves as a natural pollution barrier by preventing pollutants in storm water runoff from entering streams. In fact, wetlands act as a natural filter by using soil particles and nutrients to grow, producing cleaner water as a result.

The North Branch Canal

Located below North Avenue and the southern tip of Goose Island, the creation of shallow aquatic habitat, prairie, and a meandering stream is another proposal that should be voiced at the IEPA public hearings. The industry near Goose Island would remain, but the expanding residential

and commercial area to the east of Goose Island could be greatly enhanced with habitat and parkland. Such restoration would only increase property values in the area.

South Branch of the Chicago River

Another area of distress is the South Branch of the Chicago River. Improvements can occur by forming a prairie, shallow aquatic habitat, and deep aquatic habitat for this area. Areas such as Bubbly Creek, now unused or barely used along the South Branch, are prime areas for rehabilitation. Nearby commercial industries will not be affected from reconstruction, for the only intention is to provide habitat and parkland to neighborhoods that could use it.

Disinfection

Did you know that when the North Shore Channel is opened, millions of gallons of untreated wastewater flush into Lake Michigan, with pollution levels that go far beyond what state water quality laws allow. The amount of pathogenic material leaving sewage plants is unacceptable. The North Side plants and Calumet plants should begin disinfection as soon as possible because of the risk associated with untreated waste. Disinfection through ultraviolet light and chlorination/dechlorination is necessary and should start immediately. Continuing to ignore disinfection of sewage plant effluent entering areas known to have widespread human conduct is hazardous. Furthermore, a stronger notification process of when sewer overflows occur must be adopted to better protect public health.

Wetland Benefits in Illinois

- **Flood Control**-By acting as a giant sponge, they soak up excess water. Wetlands also slow down water flow, and give floods more time to recede.
- **Habitat expansion**- Many animals and endangered species (one third of the endangered species in Illinois) depend on wetlands for a home.
- **Improved water quality**-vegetation slows down the flow of water and allows sediments to drop to the bottom. Ninety percent of these sediments are absorbed by the wetlands. If not absorbed, sediments would create problems when they moved on to other bodies of water.
- **Economic development**- wetlands support fishing, hunting, recreation, and bird observation. They also contribute over 1.6 billion dollars to the U.S. economy yearly.

A Strong Move Forward

Such a large project may seem difficult, yet major improvement work, as we have proposed, is already moving forward with similar projects in the Lake Calumet region. In the past, the Chicago River system has been greatly modified. For example, the North Shore Channel was created through wetlands and moraine. What one generation has done, a later generation can further improve.

Let's step up to the Chicago River Challenge and announce at the IEPA public hearings the concern about the Chicago Waterways and give the solutions for a better future.

For more specifics on Sierra Club's recommendations for the Chicago and Calumet Rivers, please visit the Chicago Groups website at: illinois.sierraclub.org/chicago



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