

Report outlines vision for Chicago rivers: more accessible, inviting, cleaner

By [Leonor Vivanco](#) | [Contact Reporter](#)



Long neglected and polluted, the Calumet River region is in the midst of a makeover, thanks to dedicated residents and civic groups. (Chris Walker / Chicago Tribune)

Tourists often take architectural boat tours on the Chicago River alongside kayakers and water taxis. People relax, sip on a cocktail and even fish from the riverwalk. Now imagine swimmers in the water.

That's one of the activities envisioned for Chicago-area rivers in a report set to be released Wednesday by the Metropolitan Planning Council.

The report also recommends turning non-navigable river sections — including the stretch near Goose Island on the north branch of the Chicago River and portions of Lake Calumet — into parks with wetlands vegetation where people can fish, canoe and kayak.

The nonprofit group surveyed more than 6,000 people over 18 months — including real estate developers, river users and other stakeholders — to come up with a vision for the future of the Chicago, Calumet and Des Plaines rivers and 150 miles of riverfront. The report outlines ways to make the three rivers more accessible, inviting and cleaner by 2020, 2030 and 2040.

Recommendations include a continuous riverfront trail system to connect communities with the waterways, more recreational and retail opportunities, and improved water quality for swimmers and the many species of fish, reptiles and mammals that call the rivers home.

“We know people want to see rejuvenation along the riverfronts. To be frank, we also know not everything is going great in Chicago right now. What a document like this does is show that we have a vision for a future that is better than today,” said Josh Ellis, project lead and director at the Metropolitan Planning Council.

The report, issued in conjunction with other civic organizations and government agencies as partners, does not address the cost of the

recommendations, or how they would be funded. Finances could be a hurdle in a city that is saddled with debt.

The report was designed to motivate investment, show how the rivers can be assets, help inform future decision-makers about what's best for the rivers, establish priorities and inspire stewardship, Ellis said.

“I feel that there are many entities — government, nongovernment, individual people, community organizations — who helped write this and helped shape this. So that gives me hope they will be emotionally invested in seeing it happen, and that will lead to them being financially invested,” Ellis said.

Another obstacle is the cleanliness of the river. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2011 demanded the water on stretches of the Chicago River be clean and safe enough for recreational activities such as swimming. But the rivers aren't there yet and probably won't be clean enough to swim in for some time, said Josh Mogergerman, spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group.

“Swimming in any of the city's rivers right now is definitely a bad idea because there's a long legacy of contamination,” he said, adding that heavy metals are among the muck at the bottom of the rivers.

Testing by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, the taxpayer-funded agency that handles Cook County sewage and stormwater, last summer revealed high levels of bacteria from human waste at more than a dozen spots in the Chicago River stretching through the North Side and downtown to the Bridgeport neighborhood. Levels of disease-causing germs routinely exceeded state standards for recreational waterways, the testing showed.

But the MWRD has taken steps recently, after years of legal battles, to fully treat the wastewater at treatment plants before pouring it into the rivers, Mogergerman said.

“For a long time, the assumption was the Chicago River and Calumet River was just a place to move barges and waste. Now the MWRD put in place equipment to get rid of those germs and that will help to make the river cleaner and safer,” Mogergerman said.

Disinfecting the wastewater was the first major step toward making the river swimmable, said Margaret Frisbie, executive director of Friends of the Chicago River. “That's not to say the water is perfect, but it does mean on a day-to-day basis, it's much cleaner than it has been in the last 150 years,” she said.

The Chicago and Calumet rivers have come a long way — as shown by the growth of users and aquatic life — which indicates how water quality has progressed, Frisbie said. In the mid-1970s there were fewer than 10 species of fish; now there are more than 70, she said.

But when there's heavy rainfall, the sewer system continues to fill to capacity and overflow, sending stormwater and wastewater into the Chicago River.

Ellis said the problem of sewer overflow will largely but not fully be resolved