MEETING SUMMARY

I. Introductions
Kelsey Pudlock (CMAP) welcomed meeting attendees and thanked everyone for coming. Renee Hanlon (McHenry County Department of Planning and Development) and Cody Sherriff (City of McHenry) introduced themselves and gave a brief overview of the planning project. Kelsey then provided instructions for the topical break out room group discussions. In total, there were four topical breakout rooms. Each participant had the opportunity to join two rooms for a group discussion on a specific topic.

II. Group discussions (1st break out room)
The following are summaries of the discussions that were had in the first set of breakout rooms across the four topic areas:

Economic Development
This breakout room largely focused on the need for better linkages between the river, natural areas, and Downtown McHenry to attract visitors and generate business. Participants believe there are opportunities to attract both boaters and non-boating visitors to McHenry’s downtown with more food service and family activities, hospitality services, and events like live music. Some participants would like to see this available in other areas within the Corridor as well. For example, one participant mentioned that high wakes in the North Chapel Hill Bridge area prevent businesses from putting docs on the water, making it difficult for them to draw in customers off the river. Others voiced interest in supporting businesses that aren’t catered to boaters and attract a broader audience.

Providing more transportation connections to neighboring communities was identified as another opportunity to attract more visitors to the area. Participants would also like to see the McHenry Riverwalk completed and potentially extended to a trail that connects to other parks in the area. Additionally, participants see a need for additional signage and wayfinding to connect downtown corridors and natural areas. For those on the water, participants indicated that the McHenry Dam is difficult for boaters to cross, which deters people from the southern portion of the river from visiting areas above the
dam. Others indicated that the river congestion on the weekends may also discourage movement.

**Parks and Recreation**

Participants expressed that public access along the river could be improved by educating people on the public piers and access points the already exist as well as adding more public boat slips to the Corridor. Many acknowledged that they were unaware of some of the access points that currently exist, such as the 12 boat slips on Miller Point. One participant highlighted that the Fabulous Fox Water Trail Initiative could help with this because they have compiled maps with access points and portage sites in an effort to encourage non-motorized boaters and paddlers to get on the river. Others mentioned that existing points could be improved by adding more public amenities such as public restrooms and signage. On a similar note, dredging was noted as a ongoing challenge, particularly inside channels such as Boone Lagoon and the backwater area on the east side of the river.

In addition to boating, participants see opportunities for expanding park infrastructure and amenities, more programming and educational opportunities related to parks, and better access and connections between desirable areas. Some voiced interest in school districts developing curriculum that bring youth into nature and take advantage of what the Corridor has to offer. McHenry’s Park District would like to improve a boat launch near Charles Miller Road as well as create more fishing opportunities and a trail system through a modified wetland area, potentially leading down to Stratton Dam. Others commented that the bike crossing at Bull Valley Road needs improvement.

**Environmental Quality**

Many participants confirmed that flooding is a concern throughout the area – specifically in the Dutch Creek Subdivision and east of Stickney Run CA. Some also expressed concerns with choke points on the river as well as the management of the Stratton Dam during storm events. Other participants identified wetland degradation as an issue and emphasized the need for restoration to improve habitat and stormwater management within the Corridor. It was noted that some wetlands have been drained and tiled, dominated by invasive species, and/or disturbed by sedimentation and excess chlorides. Participants emphasized that phragmites, hybridized cattails, and buckthorn are the primary invasive species of concern. Shoreline restoration and naturalization were also opportunities identified.
Transportation
This breakout room only had one participant who expressed interest in seeing more bike lanes, so long as they don’t impact vehicular traffic. The participant believed that the County was working on obtaining pedestrians and bicyclist data to get better estimates on how often these travel modes are used throughout the County. The participant also felt that there is a good amount of transportation that is in the area, but people don’t realize that these amenities are available. Suggestions were made to develop a marketing plan for public transit that is focused on central community areas where people might be more apt to take it.

III. Group discussion (2nd break out room)
The following are summaries of the discussions that were had in the second set of breakout rooms across the four topic areas:

Economic Development
This conversation was mostly about how flooding impacts businesses in the area, yet the river still remains an important asset with some untapped potential for development. Participants pointed out that high water is a business concern in addition to a boating concern and noted that frequent and intense rainfall is exacerbating this issue. Others highlighted that funding for the waterway is limited, making it difficult to address these issues. At the same time, participants pointed out an opportunity for new development near the backwater area on the east side of the river. Participants also expressed interest in more outdoor dining and attractions to get people off the river. Others noted that there is room for McHenry to further implement their downtown development plan, including the completion of the Riverwalk.

Parks and Recreation
A handful of opportunities were identified within this breakout room that focused on improving water-based activities, marketing, and connections throughout the Corridor. Participants expressed interest in amenities that would allow boaters to recreate without having to rely on restaurants and bars for restrooms or getting onto land. Similarly, some participants would like to see parks and public spaces that are more inviting with amenities like benches and landscaping for passive recreation and enjoyment of the river. Landscaping could even function as green infrastructure—plantings that would provide beautification as well as help minimize flooding and improve water quality. Others mentioned that signage as well as opportunities for activities such as paddle boats and canoes could make the river more attractive, such as the boat/kayak rental facility in McHenry near Boone Creek.
With the impacts COVID has had on travel thus far, some voiced that marketing that targets local residents as well as others in the region could help boost people’s awareness of amenities that exist within the Corridor. Discounts for locals was also suggested as a way to boost activity in the area. Additionally, participants see opportunities to connect existing trails and bike paths. Some would like to see a connection between Moraine Hills and the Prairie Trail. Others suggested that there may be an opportunity to connect Moraine Hills to the Riverwalk. One participant also mentioned that Johnsburg may be interested in connecting the Johnsburg bridge area to McHenry’s Riverwalk.

**Environmental Quality**
Flooding throughout the Corridor is a concern that was brought up by participants in this breakout room as well. Participants expressed interest in management of the river that aimed to balance flood risk across the system (up-and-downstream). One participant suggested that communities with homes that are flooding and losing property value should partner with FEMA’s buyout program. Concerns were also raised about streambank erosion and the impact that wave action from boats has on the river’s shoreline. Public education and outreach were common themes. There was general interest in keeping the river healthy and educating residents and visitors about the value and beauty of the river and its surrounding natural areas. Related opportunities identified included planting native plants in yards, naturalizing shorelines, and creating educational pathways to learn about the local environment, which can lead to appreciation.

**Transportation**
This breakout room also had one participant who was interested in seeing trails in parks as well as near or along the Fox River. The participant also thought there could be better trail connections to the Prairie Trail and suggested a connection via Johnsburg Road, Glacial Park, and an old rail trail as a potential route. With regard to movement on the water, the participant thought that there needed to be more education for all boaters using the river and suggested that there be an education component in addition to the fee for a boating sticker. The participant voiced concerns about congestion on the river, particularly under Chapel Hill Road where the water becomes choppy.
IV. Questions from participants

Questions about the following topics were asked:

River and dam management

One participant wanted to know how the upcoming plan will address increased flows into the Fox River, management of the Stratton Dam, and align with initiatives underway the US Army Corps of Engineers.

- The project team has reached out to the US Army Corps of Engineers and is gathering more information on previous and current work along the Fox River. Finding ways to support existing work and initiatives in the study area will be a key aspect of the plan. Also, promoting greater cooperation and coordination among agencies that manage the Fox River—including the Stratton Dam—will be explored in greater detail during the plan development phase.

Grant programs

One participant wanted to know what the name of Illinois’ new green infrastructure grant program, previously called IGIG.

- The new grant program is called Green Infrastructure Grant Opportunities (GIGO). This program is administered by the Illinois EPA and funds projects to construct green infrastructure best management practices (BMPs) that prevent, eliminate, or reduce water quality impairments by decreasing stormwater runoff into Illinois’ rivers, streams, and lakes. More information on this grant program can be found here: https://www2.illinois.gov/epa/topics/grants-loans/water-financial-assistance/Pages/gigo.aspx.

V. Next Steps

Kelsey concluded the meeting and reminded participant that the online surveys on the project’s website would be closing on November 27. She also noted that meeting summaries would be posted and indicated that the next public meetings would be visioning workshops that will likely take place around the start of the new year.
Environmental Quality

Flooding: major flooding, increased in last 5-10 years, several times per year. River and lakes closed 3-4 times. Dutch Creek Subdivision

Flooding: survey identified large blockage in river south of Chapel Hill down to Rte. 120. AJ could provide survey from State of IL

Other: Complaint filed on behalf of people along the river. Need better shorelines and use of system. Inflows are expected to be up.

Invasive species: Phragmites and hybridized cattail are main issue, buckthorn too. Present within city of Mchenry, wheeler fen and along shoreline. Needed for filtration and stormwater management. Debris pushed into waterway

Other: dam doesn't get opened until water is already too high. Water flows are too strong. 2.4 ft was original Chain of Lakes level, now 4+

Other: quality of wetlands are degraded, many are disturbed - some drained and tiled, some subject to disturbance. Oversalting, sediment, etc.
Transportation

Trail connection: having munis and different groups work together.

Opportunity: Ability to gather data of use - pedestrian, vehicles, cyclist, etc.

Existing Asset: Work on marketing the available transit.

Other Ideas

Brian Plum

County is working towards the ability to have continual data on pedestrians – how many? Bicyclists - how many?

Not much vehicular congestion

Not a lot of dedicated bike paths, multi-use trails, need better connections

Surprised by amount of transportation that is in the area, people don't realize that those amenities are there and available, older population – marketing transit, focused at center areas

You want to create bike lanes that don't take the right-of-way from cars, blends into streetscape without taking away from anything
Other Ideas

- Mary Ellen Shine
- Roundabout in Johnsburg was an improvement
- Bike paths and walking paths along or near the river, add paths in park area
- Traffic controls on the river are scary, under Chapel Hill Road water is choppy, not a no wake area
- Anyone boating in the Fox River needs to be educated on the rules and regulations
- Johnsburg Road connection to Prairie Trail, could even take it north to Glacial Park, existing old rail trail there – connect Johnsburg to old rail trail
- Jet skis can be a problem