

Making Chicago-Area Rivers Great Again

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A new plan to improve Chicago-area rivers identifies key projects along the Des Plaines River and anticipates a more suburban-focused river study next year.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel stood with Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) officials Wednesday, Aug. 17 to unveil the Our Great Rivers plan focusing on the Des Plaines, Chicago and Calumet rivers.

The plan looks to improve access to the three waterways through clear signage, riverwalk paths and upgraded facilities, with the goal of making the rivers clean enough to swim in by the year 2040.

Developed largely by MPC, Our Great Rivers lists broad goals to be accomplished by the years 2020, 2030 and 2040. It does not list specific timeframes for projects other than the broad decade benchmarks.

Next year, MPC Director Josh Ellis said his agency would continue outreach in the suburbs to create a companion rivers plan, with the same goals for communities upstream and downstream from Chicago.

That outreach process would engage suburban municipal leaders and other stakeholders to assess the needs of those living and working along rivers in the suburbs.

While most of the first phase of the new plan focuses on Chicago, detailed improvements are slated for the Des Plaines River Trail including facilities south of Bryn Mawr Avenue just east of River Road near where Chicago and Rosemont meet.

Ellis says a key existing asset in the three-river system is the 56-mile Des Plaines River Trail. Although much of the trail runs through the suburbs, a major access point has been identified on a Chicago riverbank opposite the village of Rosemont.

Rosemont recently completed a Comprehensive Plan with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). One project to come out of that plan calls for a bridge linking the Des Plaines River Trail, which runs along the eastern bank of the river, with the village of Rosemont to the west. Ellis said the bridge is under construction.

Ellis and the Our Great Rivers report point to the high number of businesses and hotels just across the river in Chicago that would greatly benefit from the ability to take a short walk to restaurants, MB Financial Park and other attractions in Rosemont.

Franklin Park Mayor Barrett Pedersen is working to drum up support for a bridge across the Des Plaines River into his community, Ellis adds.

Ellis expects the Des Plaines River Trail portion of upgrades to see completion by the 2020 benchmark.

The report cites several existing assets along the Des Plaines River including boat launches for canoes, kayaks and non-motorized boats. Existing boat launches are south of Miner Street in Des Plaines' Northwestern Woods, Camp Pine Woods between Kensington Road and Euclid Avenue, Allison Woods at River Road and Milwaukee Avenue in Prospect Heights and off River Road just north of Irving Park Road in Schiller Park.

Improvements to existing Northwest suburban river assets would likely be included in next year's suburban phase two study.