

Chicago River Blue and the Blue Ribbon Awards Improving the Chicago River

Flowing past urban and suburban communities, through forest preserves and parks, industrial and commercial districts, and the heart of downtown Chicago, the Chicago River is a 156-mile meandering blue-way that connects millions of people to nature. Wild, wonderful, and nearby, the Chicago River provides wildlife places to live, considerable recreational opportunity, and an ever-increasing diversity of economic benefits derived from the waterfront economy, including navigation, recreation, river-edge and river-based businesses, residential development, and a steady increase in the local tax base, all of which improve the local economy.

As a result, the Chicago River is emerging as one of the best opportunities for improving quality of life for the people who live and work in the greater Chicago metropolitan area.

Yet the pressure to develop the river's edge to maximize these opportunities has the potential to destroy the magic the river provides. It is critical to continue the focus on river improvement and only move forward intentionally and with a comprehensive understanding of what kinds of actions protect the river and its health and provide public access.

To address this issue, Friends of the Chicago River has developed Chicago River Blue, which includes the *Blue Ribbon Awards* and corresponding "Blue Principles for River Design." Intended to educate, encourage, and reward developments and redevelopments that take people, wildlife, and clean water into account, Chicago River Blue provides guidelines, ideas, examples, vendors, on-line resources, and an annual award to make sensitive river-edge development accessible to everyone.

The Key to a Healthy Balance

It is the river's edge that holds the key to maintaining a healthy ecological relationship—that is the relationship between animals (including humans) and the environment. This intersection between land and water, known as the riparian zone, holds the potential to provide the most concentrated benefits to water quality, habitat, public health, and quality of life.

While this riparian zone has great potential to provide natural amenities to the region and its residents, the continual urbanization of the Chicago River waterfront gives reasons for celebration and concern. Current trends in development along the Chicago River show a transition away from industrial uses into residential and commercial development. The existence of industrial sites along the Chicago River will likely continue to prosper however the trend towards other uses illuminates the desirability of the Chicago River for qualitative enjoyment. The water quality improvements along the Chicago River in the last several decades have brought new attention to the Chicago River not as a burden but instead as a potentially profitable business opportunity. The challenge will be to focus on river sensitive redevelopment of all property uses.

With the demands of rapid growth that Chicago attracts and the importance of ecological conservation, Chicago River development needs management and guidance. In order to ensure the vibrancy of the Chicago River, Chicago River Blue will assist developers in selecting development techniques that will protect the Chicago River's major functions. For this reason, the Chicago River Blue will focus on protecting and capitalizing on the three major functions of the river: water (hydrology), wildlife (ecology), and people (quality of life).

Development expectations along the Chicago River currently exist in different forms and with differing levels of expectation. It is the goal of the Chicago River Blue to offer unifying direction, resources, and recognition for sound development practices that can be adapted to all uses and throughout the entirety of the Chicago River watershed.

The Chicago River watershed has a variety of land use patterns, including areas that are preserved and managed, suburban, heavily urban, and industrial. Though there is a large variant between the green building methods appropriate in each situation, all developments can participate in responsible design that will lead to sustainable success. The vision of the Chicago River Blue is not for a one-size fits all ideal that fails to promote diversity in design, intent and opportunity. It is our intent to embrace a mosaic that allows for innovation, creativity and custom design suitable for each and every development along the banks of the Chicago River.

It should not be assumed that the benefits provided through Chicago River Blue are merely captured by plants and animals. We envision developments that thoroughly integrate the Chicago River in their design. Developers can welcome residential home buyers who choose green developments and relish in a river vistas. Industrial developments can enjoy high regard as an employer who offers employee benefits that include access to natural places at work or river protection such as stormwater management. Commercial sites can attract new business by providing community access to the Chicago River where a diversity of people gather to purchase goods and services and enjoy the view.

Developers who employ these principles can consider themselves among those responsible leaders that not only have an eye for increased development value, but also recognize the long term implications of the relationship between development and our environment. Similar programs that include energy efficiency, building materials, and additional environmental considerations are becoming a core expectation in the City of Chicago and nationally. It is our vision that with the guidance of this document that the functions of the Chicago River including hydrology, habitat, and quality of life can be protected and celebrated as a fundamental consideration when developing on the Chicago River while at the same time maintaining economical feasibility and added value.

Permitting

The *Blue Principles for River Design* discusses techniques for river sensitive design. However, in order to install and maintain these techniques, developers may need to secure permits from other public agencies. The agencies in Chicago that often require permitting for Chicago River uses are: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, the City of Chicago, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, the U.S. Coast Guard, and local municipal zoning and planning commissions.

Understanding Objective-Based Principles

The Chicago River Blue principles are objective based. This means that for every design area, an objective is stated that each development should strive to fulfill. This method is an alternative to prescriptive based which requires precise applications. Selecting the objective based method intentionally provides room for the adaptation of each standard so that developments can design unique, site specific, places while pursuing identical river sensitive objectives.

In this format, the objective is first stated, and then followed up with a list of green development techniques that can be used to achieve the objective. These techniques are not exhaustive but are generally accepted in the green building industry. Techniques were selected through discussions with professionals in a variety of fields and additional information regarding the techniques is available at www.chicagoriver.org/chicagoriverblue. At every step of the way Friends recommends selecting a development team that has experience with green development techniques and the technical skills to implement techniques that benefit the water, wildlife, and people of the river.

On-line is Everything

All of the resources for Chicago River Blue and the *Blue Ribbon Awards* will be available online at www.chicagoriver.org/chicagoriverblue. The website will contain continuously updated lists of vendors that can provide services and materials, links to manuals and guides that describe the techniques used for responsible river-edge development, plants and materials that are appropriate for river-edge projects, and finally, information on how to nominate a project for a *Blue Ribbon Award* together with lists of past award winning projects.

Go for the Gold

Recognition as a *Blue Ribbon Award* winner demands a more idealistic perspective and requires intentional choices to meet a higher level of performance than what is mandated by existing local regulation. Chicago River Blue illuminates what all sites should be striving towards and techniques to assist in the continued improvement of the Chicago River for the people, plants, and animals that live in its watershed. This document reveals the underlying basics of environmental development and provides objectives that can be applied to site development to meet the goals of the project and improve the river.