

■ ILLINOIS ■

Northcenter Neighbors Riverbank

PROJECT GOAL

Enhance the environment and public use of an urban riverbank along the North Branch of the Chicago River through resident action.



Terraces built in the steep riverbank reduced soil erosion and enabled the establishment of vegetation.
 Courtesy of Pete Leki.

viewed as a liability to their community, a group of neighbors developed an informal plan that would transform the river into an asset. Excited about the prospects, the neighbors quickly initiated restoration activities.

Neighbors cleared trash and broke up large pieces of concrete illegally dumped along the river. They cut back overgrown vegetation and branches, allowing needed sunlight for soil-holding groundcover and built terraces from old branches to minimize soil erosion. Neighbors then planted vegetation native to the Chicago area. The grasses and shrubs selected were chosen for their ability to help prevent further erosion and to represent the native flora of the Chicago area, making a psychological link with local prairie restoration activities. Block parties and community-organized river work days have become a regular part of life in this neighborhood.

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 RTCA
 CONSERVATION
 SUCCESS STORY

Conservation works today at the local level. Citizens in thousands of grassroots groups are protecting places that are important to them: nearby rivers, open space for the community, and trails linking town and country. The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA) supports this grassroots movement as an important part of the National Park Service mission to protect America's natural and cultural resources. The Service increasingly is being called on to support the conservation efforts of state and local governments and citizens' organizations.

RTCA becomes involved when formally asked by the landowners, local officials, and citizens who share the desire to protect—or to improve—their communities. All projects are founded on cost sharing, cooperation, and community initiative. In these partnerships, the Service's role is to help achieve goals set collectively by the partners.

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About The Project

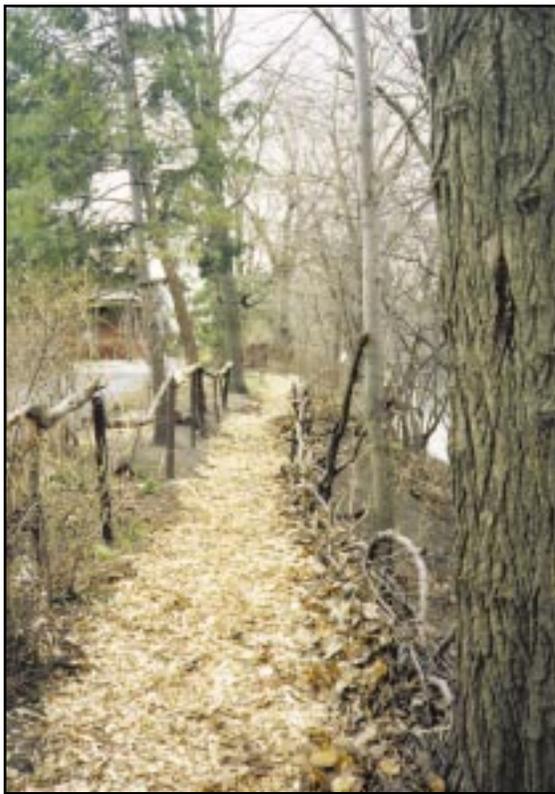
The Northcenter Neighborhood is located in an urbanized area on Chicago's north side. The project site is a few blocks long on the east bank of the Chicago River's North Branch where several residential streets dead end, providing direct access to the river. Many neighborhood residents appreciated the solitude and feeling of respite from urban life found on the riverbank. They envisioned that, with care and attention, "their" little stretch of the river could be improved and its aesthetic and educational values shared with others. The obstacles facing the realization of this vision included soil erosion, illegal dumping, and use as an illicit hangout. Tired of the river

PROJECT RESULTS

- ▶ Developed river access appropriate for an urban community.
- ▶ Established a stewardship ethic in children and adults involved with the project.
- ▶ Created a more suitable environment for wildlife and opportunities for viewing.
- ▶ Neighborhood residents, local resource experts and government officials learned to establish common goals and complete the project.
- ▶ Established an environmental education program which used the site as a hands-on laboratory.
- ▶ Recipient of a national award for **Outstanding Educational Work** from American Rivers.



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An informal trail accommodates peaceful walks, views of the river and, most importantly, relief from the stress of urban living. Courtesy of Pete Leki.

Other improvements included a half-mile walking trail next to the river. Wood chips were used to prevent slipping and decrease muddiness. Steps were also built into the riverbank providing access for nature observation and as an informal canoe launch.

The stabilization of the bank has reduced erosion improving water quality. This, in combination with the enhanced bank habitat, has helped increase the bird and duck populations. After clearing the dense vegetation and trash, the area is more open and the river can be seen quite easily. The riverbank is now treasured throughout the neighborhood while dumping and other undesirable uses are no longer tolerated.

Waters Elementary School has developed an environmental education program tied to the project, showing children the plants and animals native to their area, studying the ecology of urban river systems, and providing opportunities to learn through community service. The children have also written poems and short stories about their experiences at the site.

Future plans will extend the project into new areas and increase the variety of plant species.

“I would like to see a clean river, a river where everyone could enjoy the view of ducks swimming by, of couples, people passing by, and seeing once again the river, clean and healthy, for animals, especially fish, to live in.”

- From a poem entitled “Paradise Lost (ChicagoRiver)” by Aldi Irineo, Amundsen High School student in *SIPI: A Collection of River Stories*



Dramatic changes to the river at the turn of the century accommodated later development of the Northcenter Neighborhood. Courtesy of Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago



The neighbors that saved “their” river and received national recognition for stewardship from American Rivers. Courtesy of Pete Leki.

LIST OF PARTNERS

- **Friends of the Chicago River** served as publicist, fiscal agent, and advisor.
- **Interested Neighbors** provided visions for the riverbank and the physical labor needed to make the vision a reality.
- **Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago** provided work crews to cut trees and haul refuse. They also gave river tours to students and provided technical review of the work plan.
- **North Branch Prairie Project** sponsored by **The Nature Conservancy** provided scientific advice for appropriate plants and methods to use.
- **National Park Service**, through the ChicagoRivers Demonstration Project, provided technical guidance and encouragement.
- **Waters Elementary School** developed an environmental education program making use of the site for hands-on learning.

For more information contact:
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