



CitySpace: Understanding Chicagoans' Outdoor Needs¹

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INTRODUCTION

CitySpace is a joint planning effort by the City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development, the Chicago Park District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County to address open space opportunities in the City of Chicago. To provide a user-based perspective on open space issues, the Forest Service funded a research project, "Understanding Chicagoans' Outdoor Needs." The objectives of the research were to:

- 1) Identify city areas that have diverse types of open spaces, open space needs, population densities, and ethnic compositions;
- 2) Describe current outdoor activities and uses of open spaces by Chicagoans, and factors that enhance or inhibit these activities and uses;
- 3) Determine the range of open spaces that participants deem important, and the reasons for their importance;
- 4) Identify priorities for changing and improving open spaces that will enhance use of Chicago open spaces.

RESEARCH METHODS AND STUDY SITES

These objectives were addressed in focus groups with adults and teens in seven Chicago neighborhoods, a total of 14 focus groups in all. The study was directed by the Forest Service and the non-profit group Openlands Project and was conducted by the Metro Chicago Information Center (MCIC).

The Chicago River was one of several key open space types focused on in the study. Four of the seven neighborhoods chosen for the sample were located near the river (Figure 6.1):

- 1) **Norwood Park:** This northwest side community area has abundant forest preserve and park lands, and its residents, most of whom are white, rank near the top in socioeconomic status. The neighborhood chosen from Norwood Park borders the Caldwell Woods and Indian Road Woods Forest Preserves near Devon and Milwaukee Aves. These preserves allow access to the North Branch of the Chicago River and related recreational facilities.
- 2) **Logan Square:** This north side community area, primarily Latino, ranks among the lowest in the city in socioeconomic status and public open space opportunities. Participants for the focus groups came from the neighborhood near Fullerton and Western Aves., about ½ mile west

of the North Branch of the Chicago River. The river is mainly industrial here with little public or private open land, and principal access opportunities are views of the river from bridges.

- 3) **Bridgeport:** This mixed white-Latino working class community is located on the near southwest side and ranks among the lowest in the city in public open space opportunities. Focus group participants came from the neighborhood near 32nd and Morgan Streets, about ½ mile east of Bubbly Creek (South Fork of the South Branch of the Chicago River). The river is mainly industrial here, with some private land that is open and undeveloped.
- 4) **Hegewisch:** This far south side community, solidly white middle class, is bordered by parks, forest preserves, and state conservation lands. The neighborhood chosen for study is near 130th Street and the Calumet Expressway and is bisected by the Calumet River. There is some public access to the Little Calumet River at the Beaubien Woods Forest Preserve, as well as some vacant industrial lands along the Calumet and Little Calumet Rivers. Major industries also line the river here.

Because of the proximity of the river to these neighborhoods, focus groups were asked about their perceptions and use of the river as an open space resource.

FINDINGS

KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS

Of the eight focus groups conducted in neighborhoods near the river, the two Logan Square groups talked least about the river. The river did not seem to be a salient component in their neighborhood open space experience, perhaps because so little of it is accessible, either physically or visually. In fact, when Logan Square teens did talk about the river, they mentioned places in other neighborhoods rather than in their own.

In contrast, for Norwood Park focus group participants the forest preserves of the North Branch of the Chicago River were a central part of their outdoor recreation experience. Participants in these groups were aware not only of the river in their neighborhood, but also of places along it to the north. Part of this awareness had to do with the North Branch Bicycle Trail, which runs north from their neighborhood for nearly 20 miles to its terminus at the Chicago Botanic Garden.



FIGURE 6.1
Map of study reaches with location of nearby cityspace focus groups

Participants in both the Bridgeport teen and adult groups also knew quite a bit about the river in their neighborhood. Bubbly Creek has an infamous past as a dumping ground for the former Chicago Stockyards. Its current use is also infamous; a large vacant stretch on the east side of the river by 35th Street is called “the rocks” and is used as a hangout by local teenagers and by the homeless. The term “the rocks” refers to the large rocks that line the upper bank above the river. Several wooded areas along the river in this neighborhood are called “the Amazons” for the dense pioneer tree vegetation that covers the land, giving it a wild, jungle-like appearance.

Hegewisch focus group participants did not make a clear distinction between the Chicago River corridor and other water bodies and waterways near their neighborhood. The Hegewisch community is surrounded by wetlands, forest preserves, large and small lakes, and small rivers in addition to the Calumet and Little Calumet Rivers; in conversations about the use of this complex system, it was difficult to separate Chicago River corridor waters from the others.

CURRENT PERCEPTIONS AND USE

Several Norwood Park adults mentioned using the nearby Bunker Hill Forest Preserve for picnicking, bike riding, in-line skating, and other activities, and they liked living near the forest preserves for the woods and wildlife. They felt the river contributed to the scenery of the area. Some mentioned hearing of a place where they could rent canoes and expressed an interest in canoeing the river. Although the adults generally felt the forest preserves were well-used and well-maintained, some adults saw problems due to the “sleaze-bags” that hung out there, drinking, fighting, and doing drugs. Participants in the teen group, who used the forest preserves frequently, mentioned activities similar to those mentioned by the adults as well as fishing in the river. Some of the teenage girls were concerned with the safety of using the forest preserve bicycle trails because the trails were isolated from people, and said they were not allowed to go there without an adult.

Participants in the focus group of Logan Square teens did not use the river in their neighborhood, but used park and forest preserve sites on the North Branch north of their neighborhood. These sites included River Park and LaBagh Woods. Teens used River Park mainly for athletic sports with no apparent ties to the river; several teens used the river at LaBagh Woods to hike along and explore. Their perception of the river at LaBagh was generally positive.

Participants in the Bridgeport focus groups generally felt negative about the quality of the river in their neighborhood. Several mentioned that the vacant land along Bubbly Creek was used as a fly-dumping area for garbage like old building materials, and that old and stolen cars were dumped along the banks and burned or driven into the river and sunk. The overall poor maintenance of lands along the river made them

a source of rats. The river itself was thought by most to be highly polluted and to smell bad. The long history of industrial pollution of Bubbly Creek is thought to be the reason for the bubbling, and participants suspected that dumping from industries along the river continues today. Adult participants did not use the river, but mentioned that teens used the “rocks” and the “Amazons” to build bonfires, drink, use drugs, and entice police to chase them. The adults considered this use more of a nuisance than a serious problem. Teen participants used the rocks to hang out, play “it,” and drink, and they mentioned that other teens and young adults had parties and used drugs there, did graffiti, and burned cars. They added that homeless people lived in abandoned cars there. The Amazons were less used; one part was recently deforested and other sections were fenced off. Still, the area attracted neighborhood children to ride bikes, catch snakes, and explore.

Hegewisch focus group participants liked the large undeveloped open spaces that surround their neighborhood and said those spaces made them feel separate from the metropolitan region, “like our own little town.” The Chicago River corridor contributes to this feeling with forest preserve and vacant industrial lands along the banks of the Calumet and Little Calumet Rivers. The wetlands of Lake Calumet, Wolf Lake, and the rivers are appreciated for wildlife and other natural values, and some older participants recalled hunting raccoons and trapping muskrats in the area. Several teens used the area for boating and fishing, and some mentioned that for sport they would jump off the railroad bridge east of the Calumet Expressway into the Little Calumet River. Teens also mentioned winter sledding and summer exploring in an area of the river corridor they called the “Coal Hills,” which they characterized as “toxic river land” where “there used to be these big fires that looked like quicksand so if you stepped in it all this smoke would come up, and you could burn your foot in it.”

FUTURE ENHANCEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Participants in the Norwood Park focus groups felt the open space in the parks and forest preserves was adequate, and they desired little more in the way of facility improvements. In some cases, however, the respondents felt that the safety of these areas could be improved with more monitoring by police, such as along the bicycle trails.

Participants in the Bridgeport focus groups wanted additional open space in their neighborhood and saw the surplus vacant land along the river as a potential opportunity for many outdoor recreational uses. First, however, both the land and the river would need to be cleaned up. Few thought the river would ever be cleaned up enough to swim in, but several thought that canoeing and other water activities could realistically take place. Suggestions for improving the shorelands included cleaning up the area by the rocks and the Amazons, as well as planting trees to enhance the aesthetics.

Logan Square focus group participants said little about the river in their neighborhood, but generally felt that more, and safer, open space was needed.

Hegewisch focus group participants did not mention specific improvements that could be made along the Chicago River corridor, but in general felt that developing open space facilities and improving land and water quality could increase the recreational use of the open space in their neighborhood.

CONCLUSIONS

The CitySpace focus group study sheds additional light on perception and use of the Chicago River corridor by Chicago residents, and it profiles four communities not covered by the ChicagoRivers on-site or focus group studies. As with the previous studies, the CitySpace study shows that neighborhoods differed greatly in how people feel about and use the river for recreation. Variation in this study occurred with respect to environmental quality of the resource, amount of open space available along the river, accessibility of that open space, safety concerns, and other issues. Some of the unique shoreland areas in the Hegewisch and Bridgeport areas show how undeveloped urban open space functions as a recreational resource, especially for children, teens, and young adults. The Bridgeport area in particular showed the promise that currently undeveloped Chicago River land could yield in filling the demand for open space in severely underserved areas. Finally, with half of the focus groups in this study made up of teens, the CitySpace study provides unique insights that did not come out in the ChicagoRivers studies, and underscores the importance of understanding the perceptions and uses of open space by this major group of users.

NOTES

1. This research was funded in part through Cooperative Research Agreement 23-93-31 between the USDA Forest Service and the Openlands Project. For full details on the research project, see: Metro Chicago Information Center. (1994). *CitySpace Chicago Community Focus Group Report*. Chicago: MCIC.
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