



UPPER NORTH BRANCH RIVER AUDIT July 2019

The Partnership:

The Upper North Branch Environmental Audits were hosted through a strategic partnership between the North River Commission Environmental Committee, Friends of the Chicago River, and the Active Transportation Alliance with additional support provided by the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), REI Lincoln Park Co-op, the Chicago Parks District, Northeastern Illinois University, and numerous resident volunteers.



The North River Commission is the nonprofit community and economic development corporation for the northwest side of Chicago, serving the area from the Chicago River to Cicero Avenue and Addison Street to Devon Avenue.

Founded in 1962 by concerned residents and neighborhood institutions, the North River Commission unites over 100 civic associations, businesses, schools, institutions, and places of worship. NRC's mission is to improve the quality of life in our community by developing affordable housing, quality education, arts & culture, open space, and thriving neighborhood businesses.

Friends of the Chicago River



Friends of the Chicago River is the only organization solely dedicated to the Chicago River.

Since 1979, Friends has been working to improve the health of the Chicago River system for the benefit of people, plants, and animals; and by doing so, has laid the foundation for the river to be a beautiful, continuous, and easily accessible corridor of open space in the Chicago region.

Friends' work spans the entire 156-mile Chicago River system and its surrounding watershed. We focus on a greener river with healthy habitat, an accessible river that people can use and enjoy, and a river cared for by a broad group of supporters.



The Active Transportation Alliance is a membership-based, nonprofit advocacy organization that works to improve conditions for bicycling, walking, and transit and to engage people in healthy and active ways to get around.

One of our top priorities is advocacy for the development and construction of a continuous 27-mile-long Chicago River Trail.

One of the largest remaining trail segments to be connected is the roughly two-mile stretch between River Park and Gompers Parks, the NRC service area.

Background and Impetus to Conduct the Environmental Audits

North River Communities Neighborhood Plan

Working with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), the North River Commission (NRC) conducted a community planning process in December of 2018. The resulting North River Communities Neighborhood Plan outlines strategies for enhancing trails, parks, and the river corridor in this area. Some of the key river corridor related recommendations from the Neighborhood Plan include:

- To improve the currently limited access to the river by increasing visibility, expanding active recreational infrastructure, enhancing passive enjoyment areas, and promoting the river as a core community amenity.
- Pursue collaborative efforts to improve water quality and wildlife habitat through naturalization, riverbank improvements, and facilitating stewardship events.
- Increase multi-modal connectivity by creating safer on-street bike connections through the neighborhood, and promoting the use of existing park trails.
- Enhance the safety of existing neighborhood bikeways through signage, wayfinding, and safer crossings at busy arterial streets.



Image: Survey volunteers receiving introductory information for the River Audit

The North River Commission, its environment committee, organizational partners, and community members are working now to implement the vision outlined by the Neighborhood Plan, specifically by improving the health, safety, and accessibility of this section of the river.

To kick-off the implementation efforts, a State of the Environment Meeting was held on June 3rd, 2019 at River Park Field House. NRC Environment Chair John Friedmann laid out the need for further data collection efforts for the river and trail system as the first step towards making improvements.

Goals and Organization of the Upper North Branch Environmental Audits

Following the State of the Environment Meeting, NRC joined forces with the Friends of the Chicago River and the ATA to organize a series of survey events focussed on the river corridor and surrounding trails between River Park and Gompers Park. Called the Upper North Branch Environmental Audits, the surveys were held in mid-July, 2019 with the overall goal of identifying barriers to river recreation and access.

Over 45 volunteers attended the two events, including participants from the NRC Environmental Committee, expert staff from Friends of the Chicago River, staff from Active Transportation Alliance, local residents, NEIU students, staff from the MWRD, CDOT, MPC, the Chicago Park District, and the 39th Ward office.

Volunteers were divided into small groups and provided introductory materials to guide the survey tasks. Some groups conducted surveys from canoes, others walked the accessible river portions from the upper banks, while others suited up in waders to walk in the river.

After the surveys were complete, the host agencies worked together to compile the results into this document of observations, data, and recommendations. This document will serve as a tool for working with the relevant partner agencies and elected officials to realize a more accessible, ecologically healthy, safe, and well-connected river corridor in the North River communities.

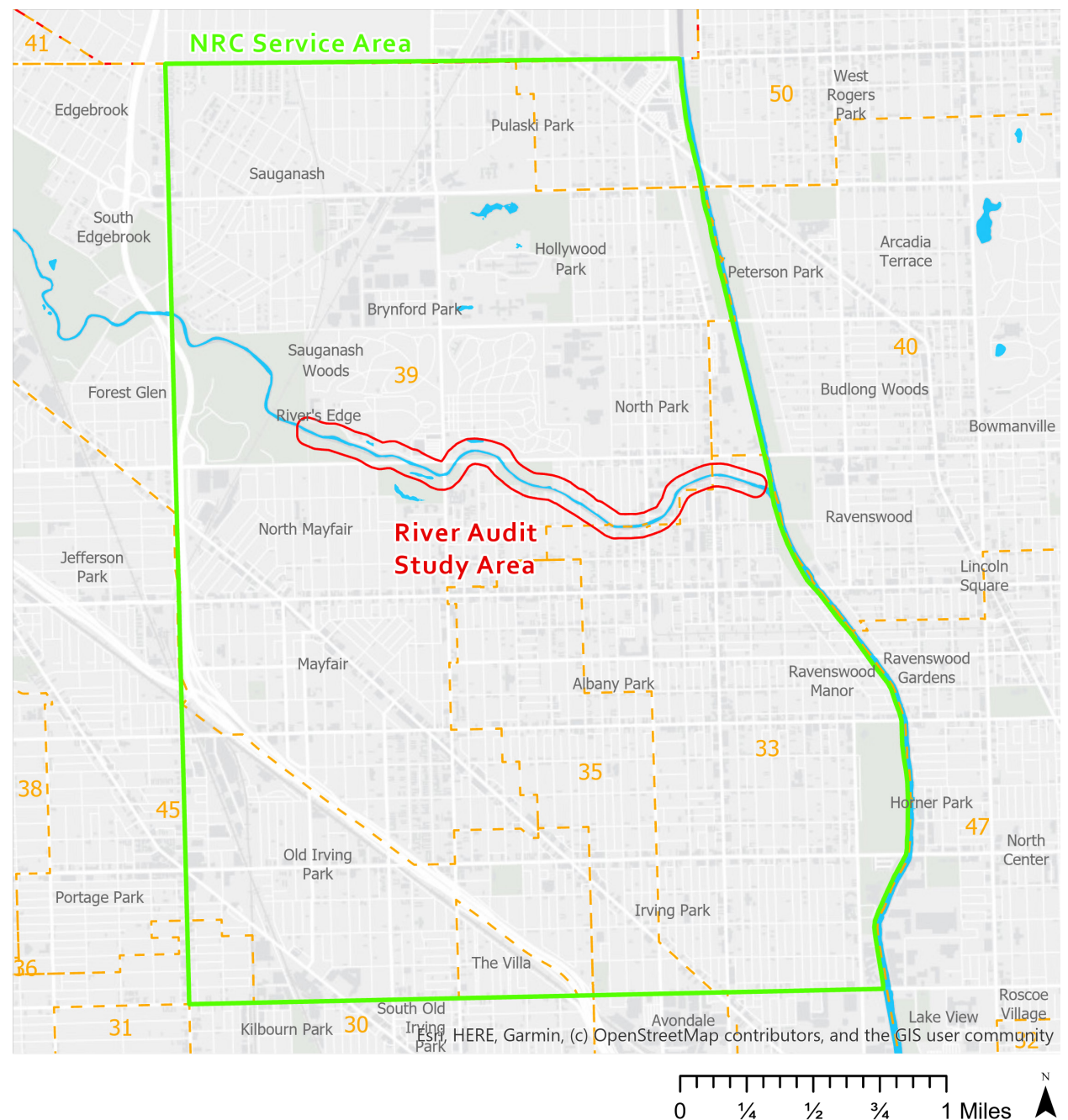


Neighborhood Context

The study area for the Upper North Branch Environment Audits was the relatively undiscovered section of the western fork of the North Branch of the Chicago River, stretching between River Park and Gompers Park. Identified as the “Upper North Branch” for the purposes of this survey, this area of the Chicago River system flows between the community areas of Albany Park and North Park neighborhoods, forming a border between the two.

Together, these neighborhoods have approximately 70,500 residents, include portions of the 33rd, 39th, and 40th wards, and are represented by four civic organizations; the North Mayfair Improvement Association, Hollywood North Park Improvement Association, Albany Park Neighbors, and West River Park Improvement Association.

Dating back to the early 20th century, these neighborhoods have served as port-of-entry communities for immigrant families, and remain ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse.



Survey Area Overview

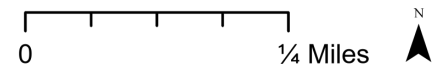


The Upper North Branch itself is located within close proximity to major community facilities, institutions, and public transportation nodes, indicating there are many stakeholders and potential stewards of this section of the River. Key attributes of the area surrounding the river corridor include:

- Moving West to East, the Upper North Branch passes from Cook County Forest Preserve District's LaBagh Woods through four Chicago Park District parks; Gompers Park, Eugene Field Park, Kiwanis Park, and River Park.

Along the way, it runs directly adjacent to North Park University's campus, and adjacent to Von Steuben High School, at Kiwanis Park.

- Additionally, the Upper North Branch passes within and half a mile from Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), Volta Elementary, Hibbard Elementary & Albany Park Multicultural Academy (APMA), and John Palmer Elementary.
- This corridor is also readily accessible on public transportation. The Upper North Branch



is less than half a mile away from the Kimball, Kedzie, and Francisco Brown Line stations. It is also accessible via the Foster (92), Kimball-Homan (82), and California/Dodge (93) bus.

- The Upper North Branch also connects two popular and vibrant river trails; the North Branch Trail and the North Shore Channel Trail, on an East-West path that includes park trails and on-street routes.

Overview of the Upper North Branch Trail Audit



Image: Trail Audit volunteers discussing findings

The Walk Audit surveyed the potential biking and pedestrian connections along the Upper North Branch, with the goal of making a continuous connection from Horner Park to the south, all the way to LaBagh Woods to the north.

The survey event took place on the evening of July 24th, beginning at the River Park Boathouse. Attendees consisted of 15 volunteers, including members of the NRC Environment Committee, staff from the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), Active Transportation Alliance, the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), and several neighborhood residents.



Image: Example of confusing existing signage

The survey route was established through conversations between the host organizations and CDOT, who identified a possible connectivity solutions, both on street and off street, that they were interested in investigating further with stakeholders.

A modified version of the AARP Walk Audit Tool Kit, created by Active Transportation Alliance with input from the CDOT, was used to guide survey participants with specific questions related to the route options. Volunteers also took photos and spoke with local residents along the way to gather information about traffic conditions and other local issues.

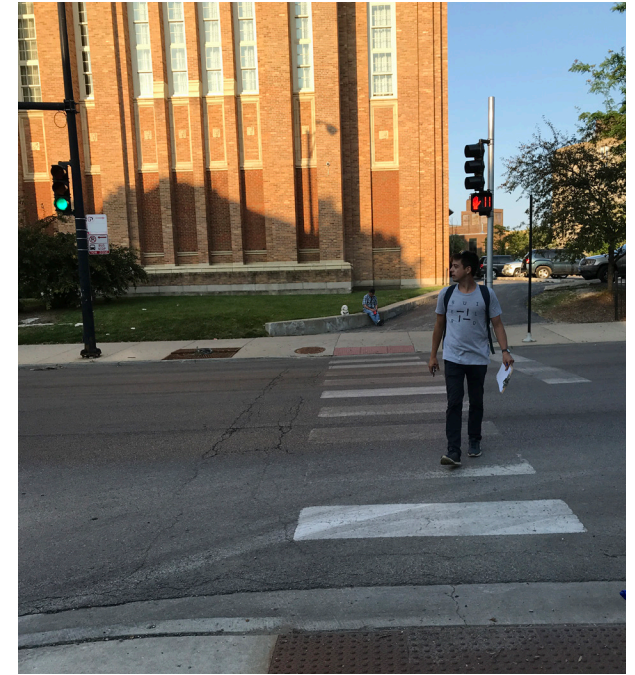


Image: Example dangerous pedestrian / bike crossing

The survey results, photos, and notes were collected and compiled by NRC and ATA following the audit. The compiled findings are summarized on the following pages.

Results of the Upper North Branch Trail Audit

Summary of Results

The bicycle and pedestrian pathway along the Upper North Branch is a mix of on-street, Chicago Park District paths, pedestrian bridges, and some institutional (University) property. Along the route that CDOT asked to be investigated, several challenges exist to successful and safe navigation by cyclists and pedestrians:



Image: Examples of existing off street trails

- The path is not intuitive, signage is lacking or confusing, and bike lane indicators are faded or nonexistent.
- The route investigated would involve cyclists riding counter-flow to traffic on several one-way streets.
- Several streets, park paths, and pedestrian bridges are in need of improvements to be safer for bicyclists and pedestrians.
- Several areas along the route require traffic calming measures in order to protect pedestrians and cyclists at crossings.

Top Opportunities for Improvement

1. Improved Wayfinding

Echoing the 2018 North River Communities Plan, there is a lack of clear wayfinding along the Upper North Branch route.

Direction to North Branch and North Shore Channel Trails:

- Ronan Park at Argyle Street: Currently a sign directs users East to the North Shore Channel, but not to the North Branch Trail.
- Ronan Park at Lawrence Avenue: Currently there is no signage at the South Entrance of West Ronan Park indicating a rider should use trails in West Ronan Park to get to the North Shore Channel or North Branch trail.

Direction to Parks:

- In addition to the wayfinding along the route that directs users to existing bike trails, signs should also indicate pathways to the parks along the way, including Gompers, Eugene Field, and River Park.



Image: Example striping and bike markings that need repainting

2. Repaint Existing Bike Lane Signage:

In many places along the route, painted bike lane indicators (the arrow icon) exists, but is very faded and hard to distinguish.

3. Improve Existing Park District Trail Sections

Kiwanis Park

- The trails within Kiwanis Park are overgrown and the trail surface is poor in many places. Designated as a Chicago Park District Natural Area, there is currently no site Steward in place at Kiwanis Park.
- There is also a need for improved lighting in Kiwanis Park, especially along the “lower trail” sections.

West River Park

- Although significant improvements have recently been made in this area of the park, several trail sections remain in poor condition.

Results of the Upper North Branch Trail Audit

4. Update Pedestrian Bridges

There are pedestrian bridges at Spaulding Avenue, Bernard Street, and Carmen Avenue between Central Park Avenue and Monticello Avenue. Each are in need of improvement. Hard and uneven thresholds at the entrances to the bridges make it difficult for a bike to pass.



Image: Thresholds at bridges are not ADA or bike friendly

5. Encourage Traffic Calming

Several sections of the proposed route are in need of traffic calming measures, as indicated by observations and reports from local residents.

- Central Park Avenue, between Foster Avenue and Lawrence Avenue was noted as a problem area by local residents, and observed as a place where cars were significantly speeding.
- Pedestrian signage and crosswalks are in place at Central Park Avenue and Carmen Avenue, but are in need of repainting. This may be an area where raised crosswalks and curb cuts could be utilized.

- Avers Street from Foster Avenue was also identified as a dangerous intersection.

6. Improve Safety of Major Intersections

- Foster Avenue and Kostner Avenue: Need to repaint crosswalks, increase visibility of bikers and pedestrians on a high traffic and high speed road.
- Carmen Avenue and Drake Avenue: Relatively high traffic for a residential street, crosswalk not visible, no pedestrian signage in place. Could be a place for curb bump outs and raised sidewalk.
- Carmen Avenue and Kimball Avenue (Von Steuben): Bikes required to use the sidewalk instead of being able to merge on to Kimball Avenue.
- The street-to-trail transition at Carmen Avenue and Central Park is unsafe and difficult for cyclists to navigate. Carmen Avenue leads directly into a curb, with curb cuts for a crosswalk on either side of the Park District path. Rather than allowing bikers to continue straight through the intersection, it forces them to use the pedestrian crosswalks.

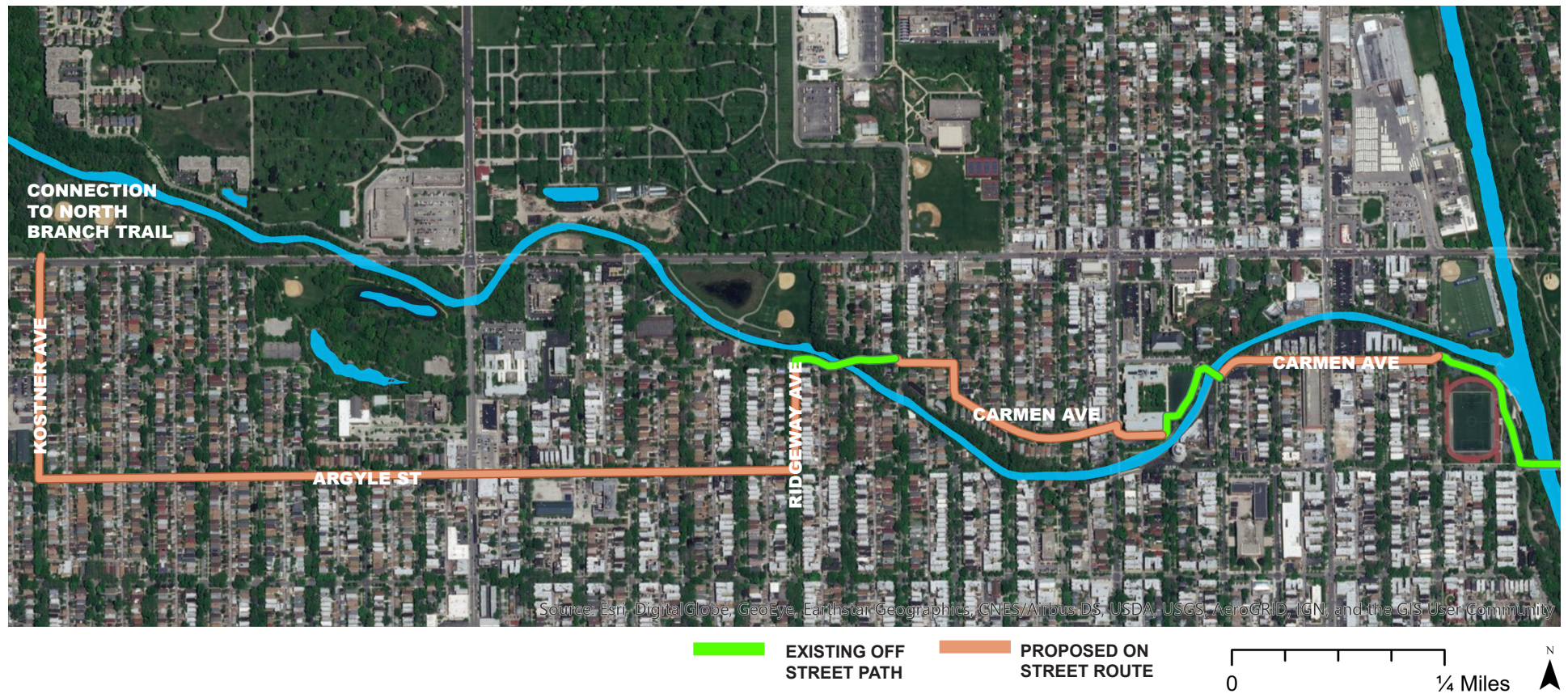


Image: Erosion on the Kewanis Park trail



Image: Existing trail entrances, such as this, can be hard to find

Results of the Upper North Branch Trail Audit



Summary of Top Challenges for Current Route

- The route can be confusing and necessitates significant wayfinding, education, and outreach to encourage user understanding.
- The route includes several one-ways where bike traffic would have to ride counter-flow to vehicle traffic. (Kostner, Argyle, Carmen)
- Current route does not utilize park trails and travels away from the Upper North Branch at Gompers and Eugene Field Park.
- Multiple stakeholders & mix of owners exist along the route, including Chicago Park District, and there is unclear jurisdiction in some areas, such as pedestrian bridges.
- Foster Avenue is a heavily-trafficked road where vehicles were frequently observed to be speeding, making conditions unsafe for cyclists and pedestrians.

Overview of the Upper North Branch River Audit

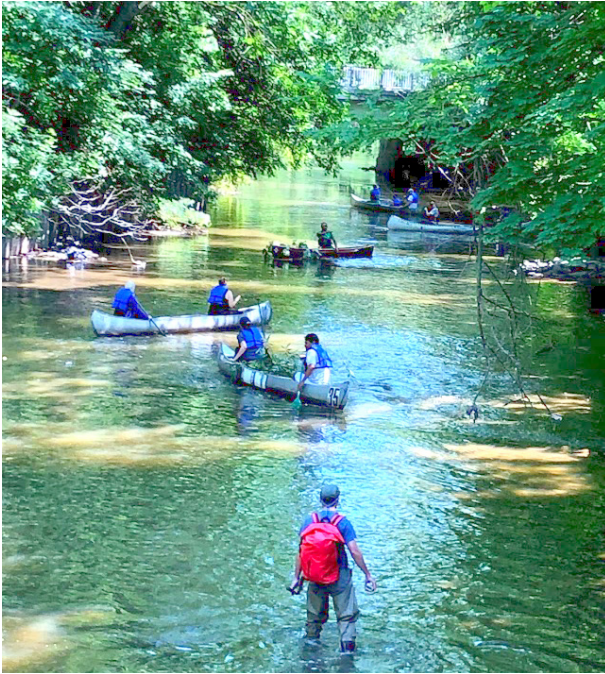


Image: River Audit survey volunteers in canoes and waders

The goal of the River Audit survey process was to identify additional barriers such as the extent of remaining concrete lining the riverbed, degraded river banks, and invasive vegetation, that can be addressed to further restore and enhance this area for people and wildlife.

The survey took place on the afternoon of July 30th, and began at the Gompers Park Field House. A group of 30 survey volunteers consisted of participants from the North River Commission's Environmental Committee, experts from Friends



Image: Discussing findings after the survey with hosts

of the Chicago River's staff, area residents, NEIU students, staff from the MWRD, the Chicago Park District, and the 39th Ward office.

The survey route included people walking alongside, wading in, and canoeing the river study area. Those walking alongside the river walked East from Gompers, while those paddling and wading in the River entered at Eugene Field Park.



Image: Volunteers also removed trash along the route

The audit tools and tasks were created by Friends of the Chicago River to survey specific components of the corridor, including potential recreational launch sites, existing fencing, riverbank stability, in-stream recreational hazards, concrete lining location, and presence of native or invasive vegetation, habitat, and wildlife.

Results of the Upper North Branch River Audit



Images: Example hazards found, trash, low-hanging wires, rocks

Summary of Results

Initial observations from the volunteers highlighted that this is both one of the most beautiful stretches of the North Branch and is an area that has room for improvement.

Some of the initial challenges observed were broken or decayed retaining walls, presence of invasive plants and trees, soil erosion due to lack of healthy undergrowth, and numerous in stream hazards such as projecting pipes, hidden rocks, and low clearance areas.

Top Opportunities for Improvement

1. Trash & Hazard Removal

The groups paddling and wading in the river observed a significant amount of debris and in-stream hazards along the survey route. These pose safety threats for future river recreational users, as well as can be harmful to wildlife.

- Observed trash discarded in the river included a metal scooter, grill cover, table, and other large items.
- A hot-spot for trash was observed surrounding the Pulaski Road bridge.
- Floating debris blocking sections of the river and debris piles were observed near the riffle feature, under bridges, and at multiple river bends throughout the corridor.
- In-stream hazards, such as projecting pipes, collapsed or decayed concrete, and low clearance trees were identified and photographed throughout the study area.

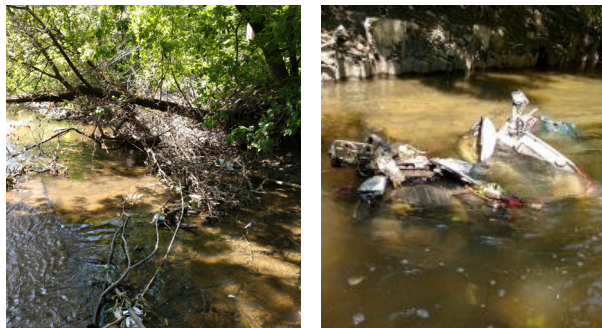


Image: Low hanging branches, and logs that collect trash



Image: Example of exposed concrete liner, and log dam

- In other sections of the River, volunteer stewardship is utilized to regularly survey and remove debris and overgrowth. With guidance from ecological experts, a stewardship group along the Upper North Branch could be formed to maintain the stretch on a regular basis.
- Regular communication with MWRD through their Citizen Incident Reporting application, as well as directly with Commissioner's offices has shown success in getting the floating debris blockages cleared. These types of communication should continue on a regular basis.

2. Signage for Water hazards

As an interim solution, low-cost signage can be used to alert recreational users to river hazard areas, such as low clearance on bridges / buildings, pipes, rocks, and the riffle feature (see map on page 15-16 for specific recommendations)

Results of the Upper North Branch River Audit

3. Ecological Restoration

The presence of invasive trees and shrubs, eroded banks, and the deteriorated concrete lining the riverbed is the were noted throughout. The following improvement efforts should be considered to help restore the ecological health of this portion of the river.

- **Invasive species removal:** Silver Maples, Tree of Heaven, and Buckthorn vegetation should be removed to allow healthy undergrowth to be reestablished.
- **Bank and soil stabilization:** Exposed soil and top soil erosion is evident along this stretch of the river. By removing the larger invasive trees and replanting native undergrowth, erosion will be reduced and healthy top soil can be reestablished.
- **Removal of concrete lining:** The riverbed is lined with concrete starting at the confluence and extending all the way to Central Park Avenue. Removal of the concrete will help to reestablish a healthy environment for fish species that can now travel freely north, due to the removal of the dam.
- **Repair unstable retaining walls:** Falling retaining walls on public and private property should be address to avoid catastrophic collapse.

- **Remove erosion control netting:** The use of erosion control netting (which harms wildlife) should be banned, and existing netting should be removed. This would require working closely with private property owners to find other ways to stabilize their banks.



Image: Decaying concrete and sheet metal retaining walls

3. Access & Recreation Opportunities

This area of the river is seldom used by paddlers because prior to the dam removal, it was very difficult to access. Today, without the dam, there has been new interest in expanding paddling along this stretch. The following improvements would help to prepare this area for safe paddling:

- **River edge chain-link fencing:** At several stretches along the Upper North Branch, chain link fencing has become an unsightly barrier to accessing the river's edge. While these fences originally were for safety, they have become deteriorated, and prohibit easy stewardship and management of the riverbank. Local residents, park users, Park

District, and Park Advisory Councils, should consider removal of chain link fencing in Gompers and Eugene Field Parks. It is possible that a different style fence, such as the split-rail design instituted at Ronan, River, and Horner Park, could be installed as a visually permeable barrier that also allows for easier access for stewardship and recreation.

- **Enhance existing launch area at Kiwanis Park:** There are no formal existing recreational launches along the Upper North Branch. At Kiwanis Park, adjacent to Von Stueben High School, a small concrete area exists along the river bank. With some basic enhancements, such as signage, cleats, and a handrail, this area could be a safer and more formalized launch.



Image: Already restored areas of the banks show the potential

Results of the Upper North Branch River Audit

- **Identify other possible future launches:**

The river audit identified several other areas that have potential to become future launches, including an existing pathway on the North side of Eugene Field Park & at the West end of Gompers Park. The feasibility of future launches in these areas should be further explored.

- **Activate the River Park Boat House:** The River Park Boathouse is currently vacant, but has potential to become a new recreational, educational, and cultural asset at the confluence of the Upper North Branch and the North Shore Channel. The NRC, Chicago Park District, local civic organizations, and other stakeholders should support the development of the River Park Boathouse as a community-focused facility that provides education, training, recreational programming, and ecological education related to the river.



Image: Alderman Nugent talking with survey volunteers

4. Education / Community Engagement

To reinforce that the river is a key neighborhood amenity and important part of our urban ecology, river educational programming and outreach efforts should continue.

- **MWRD Citizen Incident Reporting App:**

Is a useful, but little-known tool for residents to report issues with the River. MWRD and NRC, should promote it to residents along the Upper North Branch as a way to improve communication about river issues.

- **Organize Events:** NRC, Friends of the Chicago River, and other local stakeholder groups should hold a series of paddling, river ecology, cultural, and other events with local residents, community organizations, and institutions to generate more interest in the river as a central community asset.
- **Expand Engagement and Stewardship:** Work with local youth to expand engagement and stewardship of the Upper North Branch. Stakeholders, including local schools, the Park District, and the Albany Park Community Center, should work to increase recreational & ecological programming. Partnerships should be explored with existing programs, including the Chicago River Schools Network, River Lab programs at the River Park Boathouse, River Day cleanups, and the Chicago Park District Natural Area stewards program.

Summary of Top Challenges

1. **Well-Designed Launch Sites Needed:** There are no formal recreational launch sites along the Upper North Branch. Modern launches that are designed for safety, include a drop off area, parking, and nearby water / restrooms are needed.
2. **Fencing:** Several areas along the Upper North Branch within Park District property is fenced off with chain link, blocking view and access to the river for recreation and stewardship.
3. **Concrete Lined Riverbed:** A concrete liner along the streambed and sides of the Upper North Branch appears to extend from the confluence to Central Park Avenue. The existence of this liner has already been noted by the Chicago Park District and Friends of the Chicago River and its removal is highly recommended as a possible next step for ecological improvements in the area.
4. **Soil Erosion and Retaining Walls:** Many of the existing retaining walls along the corridor were noted to be in poor condition, and the lack of healthy undergrowth due to overgrown invasive trees and shrubs has created extensive soil instability in this area.

River Survey Area One Results (River Park to Spaulding Avenue)



Area One Key Recommendations:

- ① Add warning signage about riffle feature / rapids for paddlers, as well as signage warning of low water, rocks, and other hazards.
- ② Remove concrete lining and restore natural riverbed.
- ③ Improve river access area at North Park University.
- ④ Investigate potential for future canoe / kayak launch site at Carmen Avenue.



Image: North Park University building that overhangs the river



Image: Example of lack of healthy undergrowth and erosion

Survey Area Two Results (Kiwanis Park to Ridgeway Avenue)



Area Two Key Recommendations:

- 1 Improve existing informal access point in Kiwanis Park.
- 2 Remove concrete lining and restore natural riverbed.
- 3 Explore creating formalized / modern launch facility.
- 4 Add warning signage near pedestrian bridge, low clearance, shallow water, rocks and rapids.



Image: Failing retaining wall on private property



Image: Decayed sheet piling / seawall on private property

Next Steps Action List

Trails Next Steps

1. Create agency and community stakeholder outreach plan (to include PACs, Universities, neighborhood associations, aldermanic offices, and agency partners).
2. Conduct follow up discussions with identified stakeholder groups about the proposed trail route.
3. Identify priority short term improvements list.
4. Work with CDOT to implement short term improvements, such as wayfinding signage and repainting of striping.
5. Organize neighborhood biking events to encourage use of the trail route.
6. Study more direct trail connection option, utilizing off street paths through the park system.

River Next Steps

1. Create list of short term improvements / clean-up efforts to send to relevant agencies.
2. Present River Audit findings to partner agencies and elected officials.
3. Form a coalition to remove the concrete lining, including the US Army Corp of Engineers, Chicago Park District and Friends of the Chicago River.
4. Organize river community clean-up and restoration events to establish a consistent group of volunteers dedicated to maintaining this stretch of the river.
5. Conduct a natural areas assessment of the Upper North Branch to identify potential restoration projects.
6. Work with MWRD to make improvements to the Albany Park Diversion Tunnel intake facility to protect wildlife and filter out trash.
7. Organize Upper North Branch paddling events.