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Friends of the Chicago River Calls for an End to Garbage in the River

CHICAGO—On Wednesday, March 7, 2018 Friends of the Chicago River hosted its annual Chicago River Summit at MillerCoors’ Chicago headquarters to discuss garbage in the river and how to get rid of it. Ending the Waste Stream: Pathways to a Garbage-Free Chicago River, brought together advocates and innovators from across the continent who are working on garbage issues and solutions in a discussion about how to stamp out sources of garbage pollution and do a better job removing the garbage once it’s in the water.

“The Chicago River system may be cleaner than it has been in generations with greater numbers of fish and recreational use booming,” said Margaret Frisbie, Friends’ executive director. “But there is still an inordinate amount of garbage in the river which is dangerous to wildlife and repellent to the people who live in and visit Chicago. We wanted to jumpstart the conversation by bringing together the people who are on the forefront of aquatic garbage pollution removal. We can all learn from experts around the world on how to address trash in our waterways. How do we get rid of this unwanted junk which harms wildlife and diminishes the river’s reputation?”

Sponsored by MillerCoors, Ending the Waste Stream brought this conversation to the over 100 people which included those representing the City of Chicago, surrounding suburbs, and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD). Speakers included Mary Crowley, founder and executive director, Ocean Voyages Institute; Emily Franc, Anacostia Riverkeeper; Tim Hoellein, associate professor, aquatic ecology, Loyola University Chicago; Adam Lindquist, director, Healthy Harbor Initiative, Waterfront Partnership of Baltimore; and David St. Pierre, executive director, MWRD.
Starting with a global focus, experts focused on plastics in our oceans and rivers. “Marine debris at sea is often overlooked or underestimated because it’s unseen. You don’t know until you see for yourself just how much garbage has been collected,” said Mary Crowley from the Ocean Voyages Institute. Local expert, Loyola’s Associate Professor Tim Hoellein added, “Plastic pollution comes from a vast array of sources and is composed of a wide diversity of material types. Often, they interact with the ecosystem in ways you would be shocked to see. Solutions to plastic pollution will also come in a multitude of different forms and approaches. It’s a time to be creative.”

One of the most visible and creative programs is Baltimore’s Mr. Trash Wheel Project which is managed by the Waterfront Partnership of Baltimore. It essentially binge eats trash and is very good at it having collected 1.5 million pounds of trash since its launch in May 2014. “Too many streams were carrying trash into the Baltimore Harbor and Chesapeake Bay. In order to elevate the profile of the Harbor and recognize it as an economic and recreational asset, we set out on a mission to clean it up,” said Adam Lindquist.

Friends’ launched its own litter removal pilot project, “Litter Free North Shore Channel” (#LoseTheLitter), in the fall 2016. “It’s important to connect communities to their waterways and garbage impacts the well-being of communities,” said Emily Franc, Anacostia RiverKeeper. #LoseTheLitter has brought together an ever-growing group of communities along the North Shore Channel for education and volunteer activism including a strong partnership with the City of Evanston. “Friends’ efforts to remove litter by starting this pilot will lead to a broader program for the Chicago Region and we are proud to be at the forefront of this critical issue, “said Mayor Stephen H. Hagerty, Evanston’s mayor.

“We are excited to participate in the Chicago River Summit with Friends of the Chicago River and bring forth constructive and meaningful conversation on how we at the MWRD and the larger community can partner together to protect and enhance our waterways locally and downstream,” said MWRD President Mariyana Spyropoulos. “We have been improving the quality of these waters for more than a century and the renewed focus at the Chicago River Summit inspires us to continue these incredibly important efforts.”
“MillerCoors has long supported clean water projects and have made a global commitment to promote environmental programs. Friends’ policy and advocacy efforts are game-changing and MillerCoors very much wants to help make that happen,” Michael Nordman, MillerCoors.

Founded in 1979, Friends of the Chicago River is an award winning nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve and protect the Chicago River for people, plants, and animals. With over 6,000 members, volunteers, and online advocates, Friends works to make the river greener and more accessible, while building awareness of the benefits that a clean, healthy river can bring to communities across the watershed. Friends of the Chicago River is working to make the Chicago River one of the world’s greatest metropolitan rivers. For more information on Friends of the Chicago River, please visit our website: www.chicagoriver.org

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