

To: Sterling Bay
From: River Ecology and Governance Task Force Development Review Working Group
Date: 4/8/2021

Re: Design Review Comments for Subarea G1 Riverfront Proposal

Thank you for taking the time to present your proposed design for Lincoln Yards subarea G1 with the River Ecology and Governance Task Force development review working group on March 30, 2021. The presentation provided Task Force members with an overview of the most current iteration of the building and riverfront site plan and highlighted the project's efforts to meet [The Chicago River Design Guidelines](#) menu of improvements criteria.

Following the presentation there was a 'Q & A' session that allowed for Task Force members to highlight specific areas of the plan, ask clarifying questions, and provide input. The following comments are representative of the group's feedback and include written responses via the Task Force's development review form, and verbal direction from meeting participants. These comments are structured to provide the following: 1) Broader ideas that emerged around the need for holistic riverfront design, 2) Comments on each of the three major criteria items for the River Design Guidelines menu of improvements: nature, recreation, and connectivity; and 3) Secondary feedback that falls outside those criteria.

Lincoln Yards as Precedent for a Naturalized, Holistic Vision

Subarea G1 represents the first opportunity for Sterling Bay to boldly state and set a precedent for how development, recreation, and robust ecological riverine habitats can coexist thoughtfully. This development sets the tone for all future development to follow as part of a much larger whole and what will be prioritized for future riverfront development. The riverfront here is not a standalone entity but works in conjunction with future riverfront development to the north as well as throughout Lincoln Yards. When viewed through this lens, the proposal could be simplified to avoid 'trying to do too much' in what will ultimately only be a small portion of the overall development. Rather than being a singular site that satisfies all the riverfront programmatic and habitat needs, Sterling Bay should consider prioritizing habitat and allowing programmatic features to be dispersed across other parts of the broader Lincoln Yards project. To that end, constructing a naturalized shoreline without metal walls is integral to advancing a naturalized, holistic approach, discussed further below.

Nature

The River Design Guidelines list multiple improvement items under the Nature menu, but three are elevated to priority status: *New Naturalized Shoreline*, *Stormwater Best Management Practices*, and *Aquatic Wildlife Habitats*. As noted above, the proposal does include a naturalized shoreline across most of the site's river edge, while keeping the metal retaining wall in the southern section to create an overlook. This limits potential for new high value habitat connectivity for both aquatic and non-aquatic species. There is opportunity for this project to create a true *New Naturalized Shoreline* and *Aquatic Wildlife Habitats* simultaneously. Potential solutions to address erosion concerns and prioritize habitats include creating a vegetated shelf, keeping a naturalized shoreline by cantilevering the overlook or removing the overlook entirely, , and creating emergent wetlands. In general, we would recommend an approach of "no new walls" along the riverfront. For improving aquatic habitats, multiple strategies can be employed to create linear shallows that would mitigate erosion from wave action while also sheltering the biota. In this example, the seawall would be cut at the height of the average boat wake (likely 1' higher than normal water level) simultaneously with the construction of a 3' deep "backwater" which would gradually become more shallow and eventually meet the riverbank. The Task Force includes a number of members experienced in this type of habitat design who are willing to provide more specific input to Sterling Bay as needed.

The presentation highlighted how the project plans to integrate stormwater management best practices that align with the River Design Guidelines. The installation of permeable surfaces for the hardscape is a go-to solution, but a robust maintenance and monitoring plan for the function of pervious surfaces needs to be in place. Without proper maintenance, porous areas can quickly fill with sediment and function like an impervious surface in just a few short

years. The maintenance plan should also consider how pathways will be maintained during the winter months, particularly with considerations to avoid or minimize salt entering the waterway.

Although not the main focus of the presentation, the renderings show a building to be primarily glazed curtain wall. This project, and future development proposals along the river's edge, should incorporate bird safety strategies to mitigate collisions close to the ground. Careful consideration of the building cladding and materials can contribute to ecological health, alleviate light pollution, and reduce energy use in tenant spaces.

Recreation

The proposal aligns well with many of the recreation menu items laid out in the River Design Guidelines. An often overlooked consideration for recreation space is when and how and when public access is permitted. It is unclear what agreements have already been made, but preventing public spaces from becoming 'public' in name only is integral to maximizing riverfront accessibility. Whether access is limited to park district hours, or delineated between through access and stationary access, the site should be easily visible and welcoming to the public. While this level of granularity may seem less urgent for site G1 as a stand alone project, it becomes especially important when considering how the multi-use path will connect to future extensions as the remaining sub-areas and riverfront parcels are developed.

Connectivity

As the pathway layout is currently proposed, the switchback ramp could lead to unsafe interactions between cyclists and pedestrians. Although the design incorporates a large stair, that could provide direct access for cyclists to the shared river edge path below, it is likely that both cyclists and pedestrians will use the switchback ramp for this purpose. Overlapping uses will lead to potentially unsafe or precarious situations for all users at numerous areas throughout the site. Obvious pinch-points with potential for collisions include: switchbacks, blind corners, and where the ramp crosses multiple stair landings. The design team proposed the use of signage to guide interactions between cyclists and pedestrians. Acknowledging the necessity to meet ADA requirements, and that only so much can be done to restrict unsafe user behavior, it is unlikely that signage alone would create *safe* connectivity through the site. We would recommend revisiting the design of some of the connection points for ramps and switchbacks to ensure that conflicts are reduced as much as possible and that safety is prioritized.

Secondary Feedback

The following input falls outside the River Design Guidelines criteria, but opportunities for overlapping solutions with the previously outlined feedback is evident. The project should attempt to restrict hardscape as much as possible and allow for additional softscape and planting areas. Not only would this align with the three River Design Guidelines criteria above, but would also reduce the 'office plaza' feel of the open space as it is currently proposed. The design team should also consider activating the ground floor and lobby with semi-public programmed spaces such as a cafe/restaurant or open seating. Allowing the outdoor space to bleed into the building will make for a more welcoming design as well as grounding the building to the site itself. Ultimately, what gets constructed on subarea G1, both indoor and outdoor, should be site (and river) specific.

Again, thank you for taking the time to present to the River Ecology and Governance Task Force Development Review Working Group. Your proposal is a good step towards enhancing the river and the riverfront, from both a land and river perspective. We appreciate the iterative approach your team has taken thus far and are thankful for the opportunity to provide comments and input to guide final design. Your consideration of the spirit of the River Design Guidelines is admirable. Lincoln Yards has the ability to set a precedent for a naturalized, holistic vision to maximize the potential of one of Chicago's most precious and recognized natural resources. We welcome the opportunity for feedback, offer our services in the future, and look forward to your responses.

Thank you.