

Calumet River Corridor  
Economic Development Vision and Strategy

Robbins • Blue Island • Calumet Park  
Riverdale • Dolton • Calumet City • Burnham

DRAFT Final Report of the Calumet Rivers Development Project  
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## Overview

The purpose of Calumet Rivers Development Project was to create a framework for development and investment in the seven south suburban communities that comprise the Calumet River Corridor, including Robbins, Blue Island, Calumet Park, Riverdale, Dolton, Calumet City, and Burnham. The project focused on the Calumet River system as an important environmental amenity and economic asset. It is based on the assumption that by strategically working together, the communities can accelerate and expand the potential economic impact of their individual efforts.

The result is a shared economic development and land-use vision, identification of priority projects and development sites, recommended actions to implement the vision and projects, and an outline of steps to build the planning and development capacity that will be necessary to implement the vision.

The consultant team, comprised of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, (CMAP), Business Districts, Inc. (BDI), Vandewalle & Associates (V&A), and the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association (SSMMA), approached the project by profiling current conditions, trends and emerging projects; identifying new possibilities; and engaging community and stakeholders through steering committee meetings and roundtable discussions. The team built on existing planning and development activities and information, such as the Brownfields Assessment Project, the Chicago Southland Tomorrow Initiative, the South Suburban Tax Reactivation Project, the 2040 Regional Framework Plan, and South Suburban Calumet Area Open Space Initiative. In addition, the team researched best practices in river corridor development, and conducted a workshop for stakeholders to help frame the vision statement and formulate recommendations.

Throughout the process, a twenty-one member steering committee provided information and feedback. The steering committee included representatives of the seven Calumet River Corridor communities, business, potential investors, and public and non-profit stakeholders. It met eight times in the course of the project and approved the content of the vision statement and the recommendations for next steps.

The report that follows is divided into four sections:

- Background description of the project area
- Vision for economic development
- Strategy and recommendations for next steps
- Appendices with technical memoranda and maps

## **The Calumet River Corridor: A Profile**

### ***Location***

The Corridor's location continues to be one of its most important assets and provides a foundation for future development. It is in Chicago's large and diverse industrial, commercial and domestic market, northwest Indiana's heavy industrial core, and extensive agribusiness in the Midwest. Furthermore, there is already direct access to all major modes of transportation, including interstate highways, rail freight lines, inter-modal freight yards, waterways connecting Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River, international airports, multiple regional commuter rail lines, and various domestic and commercial markets. Recent Investments in transportation infrastructure, research and development facilities, and traditional and emerging industries have strengthened businesses in the entire region to compete in national and global markets.

### ***Land-Use***

Land use within the Calumet River Corridor reflects its long history as an industrial capital and the decline of industry over the past 30 years. The Calumet River Corridor, defined for the purpose of land use analysis as the area within one mile of the river, consists of over 14,200 acres. For details, see the land use map included in the appendices of this report. In 2001, 34% of the corridor consisted of residential uses, mostly single-family homes. The next two significant uses were 15% industrial and another 15% transportation and utilities, primarily the extensive rail roads and rail yards, as well as the land fills in the eastern half of the corridor. These two uses were down from a combined 32% of land use in 1995. From 1995 to 2001 vacant land increased from 11% to almost 13%. A significant amount of the vacant land is located either adjacent to or very near the river itself. During that same period, public and privately owned open space increased slightly from about 7% to 8%.

The Little Calumet River and Calumet-Sag Channel provide unique and valuable assets for the future development of the area. They flow through forest preserves and parks, natural habitats, undeveloped open-space, farmland, and cultural and recreational areas. In addition, there are a number of public parks, forest preserves, and important cultural amenities, such as Ton Farms, adjacent to the corridor. Several projects have been proposed and initiated in an effort to take full advantage of these assets. The significant amount of vacant land and open space provides opportunities to develop the corridor as a recreational, natural asset, as well as a magnet for development and re-development near the river.

### ***Demographics***

In the 2000 Census, the population of the seven municipalities that make up the Calumet River Corridor was 122,524. This figure represents a 5% increase over the corridor's 1990 Census population, comparable to the growth that occurred elsewhere in Cook County during the same period. The population of the seven municipalities in 2000 was about 62% African-American, 24% white, and 13% Latino. The Latino population was growing though, by as much as 70% over 1990 figures in Blue Island

and Calumet City, similar to Latino population growth elsewhere in the Chicago metropolitan region. The seven municipalities have a slightly larger youth population, 31% under age 18, compared to the rest of Cook County, where it is 26% under age 18.

### ***Economy***

The Calumet River Corridor is at an important juncture in its development. In the past 35 years its economic base, number of skilled jobs and other opportunities have declined, reflecting changes in national and international markets and technologies. But the metropolitan region's economic base and population are now changing, growing and spreading outward. The Calumet River Corridor is well poised to take advantage of these changes to become a key participant in the development that is taking place in the surrounding region. Corridor communities are resource rich, where residents find value in affordable housing, a fully developed transportation network, and jobs associated with its long industrial history. With the increasing interest in riverfront development throughout the United States, the Calumet River Corridor communities are experiencing renewed residential and commercial development interest. At the same time, the high cost of fuel and industrial property in other parts of the region are increasing the attractiveness for manufacturing.

### ***Market***

The Calumet River Corridor communities are more densely settled than other Chicago area communities are; they have fewer jobs per household and lower average incomes than the Chicago metro area, Illinois, and the United States. Another key challenge to these communities is the relatively low average annual household income, \$49,000, compared to \$79,000 for the metro region, and \$72,000 for Illinois. Not surprisingly, Calumet River Corridor residents have lower retail spending potential than in the Chicago Metro area, but the high per square population density creates a higher per square mile income than the Chicago metro area, \$81,000 compared to \$42,000. Yet, only three Calumet River Corridor communities -- Calumet City, Blue Island and Calumet Park -- have been able to capture their residents' spending by developing successful retail clusters, demonstrating that residents are shopping outside their communities.

Housing prices in the Calumet Corridor also lag regional and national averages. Commercial lease rates and vacancies reflect the quality of the existing properties and the market demand for space. Although the existing conditions show a significant lag between the Calumet Corridor communities and the regional market, the growing interest in riverfront development presents an important opportunity for these communities to improve these conditions.

### ***Planning and Development Capacity***

Economic development expertise and experience varies among the communities along the corridor. Few have had resources to employ full staff with a broad set of economic development skills or to institute a full set of economic development tools and incentives. Consequently many have relied on part-time consultants. At the same time, there is no entity that could coordinate economic development in corridor communities

or take advantage of scale economies in developing the core economic development skills and tools to support activities in each of the communities.

## Calumet River Corridor Economic Development Vision

### ***Vision Statement***

As the northern gateway to the Chicago Southland, the Calumet River Corridor plays a central role in the metropolitan region's economy. It offers a unique blend of opportunities for industrial development, commerce, housing, and recreation that forms its economic base, offers individual employment and career opportunities, and creates a high quality of life.

### ***Principles***

Economic development within the Corridor will take advantage of:

- The natural, cultural and historical features of the Calumet River Corridor
- The Corridor's special economic geography and transportation linkages that position it to be an important player in the global supply chain
- The region's research and development capacity

Emphasis will be on fostering development that creates or adds value, provides sustainable wage jobs with career advancement potential, contributes to environmental sustainability and expands access to the riverfront. It will be linked with education and training services that meet employers' needs for a productive workforce and individuals' needs for skills and competencies to succeed.

### ***Components***

#### **Industrial Development**

Building on its current manufacturing strengths, the Corridor's industrial base will comprise a mix of highly efficient firms in traditional and emerging sectors that serve growing markets for green products and services, and supply the Chicago/Midwest region's industrial base. Development will:

- Be concentrated in areas in Calumet City, Dolton, Robbins and Riverdale
- Be known for its access to multi-modal transportation and warehousing, high speed telecommunications and alternative energy resources
- Follow principles and practices of environmental sustainability in the development and operation of the industries
- Be informed by basic and applied research and technical expertise made available by the region's universities and research institutes

### **Commercial and Retail Mix**

Economic development efforts will encourage the improvement, redevelopment and construction of a variety of commercial and retail projects to meet the needs of residents for a broad range of goods and services and attract visitors and consumers from outside the area. Development will:

- Be concentrated in designated areas along the river, main streets, transit-oriented districts, and major arterials
- Include a mix of national and regional investment
- Have a strong representation of small businesses and local ownership
- Enhance the river as a central feature of the corridor and reinforce the area's cultural legacy
- Be aligned with public transportation, pedestrian and bicycle access

### **Open Space and Recreation**

Priority will be on improving and maintaining open spaces, natural areas, and recreational and cultural amenities that will contribute to a positive image and profile, preserve natural resources, help create a high quality of life, and attract visitors. Key features will include:

- Bicycle and pedestrian pathways along the river with connections to Lake Michigan, the I&M Canal, and the Burnham Trail and commercial and entertainment districts and neighborhoods in the Corridor
- A high profile, signature festival or event that involves all of the communities and showcases the river and surrounding Corridor, such as a rowing competition
- Multiple access points to the river, multi-purpose marinas and a variety of water-related activities

### **Residential Development**

The Corridor will be known for its attractive mix of housing types that supports its economic base, image, and quality of life for a diverse population. Development will:

- Feature a variety of price points to serve current and new residents
- Have strong connections to the riverfront, commercial clusters, and transportation
- Follow established design guidelines

### **Economic Development Capacity**

Public and private sector leaders and organizations involved in the economic development of the Corridor will form and actively participate in a Calumet River Corridor Council, work closely together on key initiatives, and promote and implement the vision in their communities. The Council will have full-time staff and clear functions, including:

- Creating a single voice to advocate for priority projects
- Playing a leadership role on priority projects by bringing private and public sector players together, organizing the process and keeping it on track
- Assuring coordination of economic development activities, including those in other key corridors (e.g. I-394, I-57, the southeast commuter rail corridors and multi-use trails) and facilitation of responses to sometimes competing needs, e.g. recreational vs. freight uses of the river
- Helping raise public and private funding for detailed planning and implementation of projects, and providing technical assistance in financial packaging and use of financial tools
- Establishing proactive/coordinated relationships with external agencies and organizations, e.g. the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- Marketing the Corridor's development opportunities
- Sponsoring a Planning and Development Academy to help elected officials, staff, and organizations build the capacity and tools necessary to effectively carry out economic development initiatives

## **Calumet River Corridor Economic Development Strategy**

Development of the Calumet River Corridor Economic Development Vision was conceived as the first step in a strategic and coordinated economic development process.

In the next phase (over the next 2-3 years), the Corridor communities will undertake priority actions that begin to implement the vision. The recommendations therefore include actions focused on building organizational and technical capacity to pursue the vision and specific projects will have a demonstrable impact on future development. Recommendations 3, 4, and 5 suggest Council support for potentially significant projects that have been recently initiated. The Council's leadership, coordination, fund-raising and technical assistance functions in planning, design and construction will contribute to their success. Recommendations 6 – 10 identify new activities that should be led and coordinated by the Council. The recommended actions were identified as priorities on the basis of the following criteria:

- A private sector market for development opportunities and financial feasibility
- Potential to generate revenue, attract additional development, raise the image and visibility of the corridor, and benefit residents
- Involvement of more than one community
- Use of development tools that are already in place or easily established
- Implementation or initiation in the next 2-3 years

### ***Recommended Actions***

#### **1. Establish a Calumet River Corridor Economic Development Council**

Formalization of a Calumet River Corridor Economic Development Council charged with leading, coordinating and supporting key economic development activities will greatly enhance the capacity of the Calumet River Corridor communities to attract development and investment, create synergies, and efficiently initiate and complete projects.

Formation of the Council will involve the following:

- Approval of an Intergovernmental Agreement by the Calumet River Corridor communities
- Employment of a full-time staff person at the Chicago Southland Economic Development Corporation to market key targeted investment opportunities, assure coordination, lead priority development projects, engage key stakeholders, raise the profile of the Corridor, and prepare business plans for the Council with costs, revenue, and schedules
- Convening the first Council meeting by June 30, 2007

## **2. Sponsor a Planning and Economic Development Academy**

Economic development in the corridor will depend upon the involvement and skills of key people in each of the communities and in organizations that have a role in economic development. It will be important to raise the skills of all of the individuals involved, increase their understanding of their roles and how they work with each other, and what is required to implement the vision and priority projects. A Planning and Economic Development Academy is therefore recommended to develop a shared understanding of the corridor vision and priority projects, define the relationships among member communities and how they can work together, and build technical skills. The Academy must be more than a workshop or series of lectures. It must create a collaborative opportunity to learn skills and techniques and apply them to priority projects. More specifically, the program will:

- Define the economic development roles and responsibilities of municipal officials, staff, and private sector individuals and develop an understanding of how participants can effectively play these roles to achieve the vision
- Increase understanding of the tools and resources available to individual communities and the Corridor as a whole (e.g. zoning, design controls, environmental standards and LEED principles, financial incentives, TIFs, etc.) and capacity to apply them
- Build technical skills in, e.g., negotiation, accessing and working with technical experts, regional organizations, and consultants, marketing, and fund-raising

The audience for the Academy will include but not be limited to: elected officials, planning and zoning commissioners, local staff involved in development (building department, planning, transportation, parks, etc.), and other public (county, state and federal) officials and participants.

## **3. Support Development of the Calumet-Sag Multi-use Trail**

The Calumet-Sag Trail is being planned as a multi-purpose trail that will extend 26 miles along the Calumet-Sag Channel and Little Calumet River from the Illinois & Michigan Canal in Lemont eastward to the Burnham Greenway Trail in the Village of Burnham, linking fourteen communities. The Trail will connect fifteen regional multi-use trails, as well as transit stations, marinas, retail areas, parks, forest preserves, and other natural areas and it will pass through the Fay's Point residential and recreational community under construction near 130th & Ashland in Blue Island. Funding for the trail, projected to cost about \$20 million, is being sought from federal and state grants, foundations, corporations, real estate developers, public health agencies, municipalities, park districts and trail advocates.

The Calumet-Sag Trail Coalition developed the concept and has mobilized support. Key participants include the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, the City of Palos Heights, the National Park Service, Cook County Forest Preserve District, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, the City of Blue Island, the Chicago Southland Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the South Suburban

Mayors and Managers Association. URS Corporation, an environmental services firm, is the consultant/ contractor. Phase I is underway. Phase II, which encompasses the Corridor communities, is being initiated.

The trail will expand recreational opportunities for an estimated 185,000 residents who live within two miles of the trail. It will be a critical component of the Corridor's economic future by linking the seven communities, provide access to the river, enhancing the area's image, attract residents from the entire metropolitan region, and stimulating new residential and business development.

The Calumet River Corridor Council can play an active role in moving the project to the next phase of detailed planning and development by:

- Participating in the Calumet-Sag Coalition, a group that has been formed to promote the development of the multi-use trail
- Working with the Calumet-Sag Coalition to identify priority trail segments for development, or those that have the greatest feasibility for short term completion, and would have multiple benefits
- Working with the Calumet-Sag Coalition to develop a funding strategy that identifies potential public and private funders and takes advantage of opportunities to leverage resources

#### **4. Support Transit Oriented Development (TOD) in Robbins and Blue Island**

Transit Oriented Development districts have an incremental impact on new development and strengthen current economic activity through focused new development and revitalization and creation of a positive image for residents and commuters. The sites often contain a "pedestrian feel" which is desired by residents in an otherwise auto-oriented society.

The Transit Oriented Development (TOD) in the area around the Metra site on the border of Blue Island and Robbins has key elements for a successful development strategy. Metra has a small new train station on the Rock Island Line. Immediately proximate to the station is Western Avenue, an artery with high traffic counts and high employee count businesses. To the south strong neighborhoods with significant new housing construction are emerging. Directly adjacent to the site on the north is a former retail site that is controlled by the City of Blue Island. This combination of positive factors offers the opportunity for a small retail convenience site to serve the TOD as well as the surrounding neighborhoods and employees.

A new senior center in Robbins and multiple vacant sites controlled by the Village are near the commuter station, offering a significant amenity to potential buyers of these properties. Additional parking will be needed to make the Metra station more than a "kiss and ride" venue. Finally, a successful TOD development could provide some positive momentum for downtown development in Robbins located about two blocks to the west if planning is coordinated with Blue island, Robbins and Metra.

## **5. Support Development at the Robbins Community Power Facility and adjacent Energy Park**

Robbins Community Power LLC recently announced plans to retrofit and redevelop the idle \$300 million waste to energy plant in Robbins and generate electricity. The process will use clean wood material, or biomass, to create energy. The project will create jobs, revenue and a source of power that will attract more development for the adjacent commercial properties and the entire south suburban region.

Through its implementing staff the Council should lead efforts in cooperation with the Village of Robbins to attract development to the adjacent energy park, by preparing a marketing strategy, assembling an investor information package, and developing a process for working with interested investors.

## **6. Market and Develop Industrial Property in Dolton and Calumet City**

A site located on the south side of the river in both Dolton and Calumet City and bisected by the Bishop Ford Freeway (I-94) is one of the few areas in the Corridor that is suitable for industrial development due to its size (approximately 80 acres) and location. This is crucial because industrial development typically creates high skilled, high wage jobs and significant tax revenue.

In addition to the size of the site, other important considerations in recommending it as a priority include:

- Its proximity to multi-modal transportation and substantial warehousing space, and the river
- A relatively small number of landowners, facilitating consolidation of property to create parcels of significant size
- Consistency of industrial development of the site with previous uses as well as existing and proposed development in surrounding area
- Access to a skilled manufacturing labor force in the immediate vicinity
- Targeting of the northern bank of the river by the City of Chicago as a top priority for industrial development, creating important economic synergies and an industrial agglomeration in the area

It should be noted however, that development of this site will entail a longer planning and implementation timeline than the other recommended actions. Initial steps will primarily be focused on research, planning, preliminary outreach to the private sector, and determination of infrastructure needs. However, over the long term, the opportunities for the region generated by this site may be substantial.

## **7. Plan Corridor Festivals and Events**

High profile events are increasingly being used by communities, regions, states, and countries to catalyze economic development and strengthen their image. Examples range from annual music festivals, antique markets, international sports, and unique

art events (Chihuly at Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago, the Gates in New York City, the Cows in Chicago, etc.) to events such as children's ecology tours, historic tours, and river clean-up efforts. A high profile, signature event would help raise the profile of the corridor internally and externally, attract "tourists" from other parts of the region, generate revenue, and provide a vehicle for collaboration among the communities and engaging businesses and residents. At the same time, an event (s) that is co-sponsored by all of the corridor communities is attractive because of relatively low capital requirements and a short period for planning and implementation.

Targeted events specifically designed to market the area to investors are also recommended. A luxury boat tour of the Calumet River Corridor, for example, originating at Navy Pier, entering the Little Calumet River, progressing through the Calumet River Corridor and west along the Calumet-Sag Channel, would highlight the Corridor's natural beauty and its industrial potential. An event of this scale will generate developer and community interest from the entire Chicago metropolitan area, and will greatly enhance the image of the Calumet River Corridor.

## **8. Prepare a Calumet River Corridor Pattern Book/Design Guidelines**

Design guidelines can be used to create a recognizable identity for the Calumet River Corridor and to guide a coordinated and integrated approach to development. They will articulate the vision, character, sense of place and site requirements, providing a framework for site development, design, amenities, and construction components (e.g. facades, themes, lighting, landscaping, set-backs from the river and roads, densities, green principles, etc.) Municipal design guidelines will maintain a consistent quality and provide developers and property owners with clear expectations, and should apply to new construction, re-development, streetscapes, open spaces and infrastructure for all projects. A pattern book can be developed for the entire corridor, and could be modified or personalized by individual communities.

Mechanisms for implementing the guidelines are critical. They may be advisory, or they may be incorporated into zoning and building codes and plans for the corridor district, and used in negotiation with developers who are requesting project approval and financing.

## **9. Work with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) on Land Conveyance Processes**

The MWRD controls property on both banks of the Calumet-Sag Channel, making its policies critical to the future development of the corridor. Historically, MWRD's protocols have been consistent with its mission, which is protecting the water quality within its area of responsibility and protecting the water supply of Lake Michigan through wastewater conveyance and treatment as well as storm water management. It promotes recreational use and public access to its property through its Waterway Strategy Resolution, including a 60-foot setback requirement to allow, for example, for construction of the Calumet-Sag Trail.

A review of MWRD's criteria and procedures for the use of land along the waterway would facilitate a strategic and coordinated approach to development. Officials with MWRD have participated in the Calumet Rivers Development Project by serving in an advisory capacity on the Steering Committee. Public and private stakeholders should work with them in discussing current policies, identifying best practices in comparable situations, and recommending revisions that are consistent with the MWRD's mission and laws governing the use of its land, the Corridor's economic development vision, and any detailed land-use plans that are developed.

## **10. Research Opportunities to Pursue Green Technology and Development**

Over the past five years, the market for green products has experienced double-digit annual growth compared with low single-digit growth in conventional products. The market isn't small: \$230 billion a year is spent on goods considered sustainable products and services. An estimated 36 million consumers, or 12 percent of the U.S. population, embrace the green market, and only 21 percent have indicated they are not interested. With the City of Chicago's strong emphasis on green products and principles, the market may be stronger on a per capita basis in the Chicago metropolitan area.

Similarly, there is strong interest and research capacity in the development of alternative bio-based fuels and recycling methods in the Midwest region. Building on its location, the precedent of the Robbins Community Power facility and Energy Park, its relatively low property costs and access to energy-efficient barge transit, the Corridor Council has a real opportunity to develop an environmentally focused commercial cluster. This may be done by attracting investment, nurturing small firms, and encouraging existing businesses to explore new products, services and technologies. Development of an environmental cluster, however, will involve a multi-phase, longer-term strategy.

The next steps will involve analysis of the various market segments that comprise the industry and of the segments that can feasibly be pursued by the Calumet River Corridor Council.