



RETROSPECTIVE

Calumet Stormwater Collaborative

Supporting a Community of Practice for
Stormwater Management in the Calumet Region

December 2024

REPORT

Calumet Stormwater Collaborative

Supporting a Community of Practice for Stormwater Management in the Calumet Region

December 2024

Introduction

Established to deliver on the vision of the Millennium Reserve Initiative¹, the Calumet Stormwater Collaborative (CSC) has evolved over 10 years as a dynamic convenor of people and organizations aligned around the goal of improving stormwater management in the Calumet Region. Over this period, Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) served as the primary administrator and facilitator of the CSC. We have come to understand this work as best aligned with the concept of a Community of Practice.

As we prepare to transition leadership of this significant place-based stormwater initiative into a permanent home as a working group of the Greater Chicago Watershed Alliance², through our strategic partnership with the Friends of the Chicago River, we thought it best to look back at the origins and evolution of the CSC and capture what we have learned. Our goals for this retrospective are to:

- **Reflect on the Evolution of the Project:** Trace the journey of the CSC from its formation to its current state, exploring major milestones, format changes, and strategies that have contributed to its growth and adaptability.
- **Summarize CSC's Key Elements and Impacts:** Highlight the foundational principles, objectives, and outcomes of the CSC, showcasing its role as a model for coordinating stakeholders and addressing stormwater challenges with an equity lens.
- **Capture Insights to Inform Future Community of Practice Work:** Provide valuable lessons and best practices from the CSC's experiences to guide similar initiatives tackling stormwater management or other regional issues.

We acknowledge that the CSC is more than the sum of its parts, and certainly more than the legacy of our organization's stewardship of this work. We are grateful to the many MPC staff, CSC members, the Work Group leaders, and especially to the Steering Committee, who provided guidance and support through the Covid-era.

Since its inception in 2014, the CSC has evolved into a vital platform for collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and coordinated action, helping to advance stormwater solutions that benefit communities and ecosystems across the region. By documenting the successes, challenges, and ongoing efforts of the CSC, this report seeks to provide inspiration and practical insights for current and future collaborations dedicated to resilient, equitable stormwater management.

¹ Millennium Reserve Initiative, [Governor Quinn Announces Millennium Reserve Initiative in Calumet Region of Chicago](#)

² Greater Chicago Watershed Alliance (GCWA), [Greater Chicago Watershed Alliance - Policy and Planning Featured Programs - Programs - Friends of the Chicago River](#)



The Purpose and Origins of the Calumet Stormwater Collaborative

The Calumet Stormwater Collaborative (CSC) was established in 2014 to tackle persistent stormwater and flooding challenges in the Calumet Region, an urbanized, industrial area built over a historic wetland complex. Defined during the 2011 Millennium Reserve initiative under then-Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, the region spans over 140,000 acres across 36 municipalities, with miles of lake and riverfront property and more than 15,000 acres of publicly owned natural areas and open spaces.

The Millennium Reserve initiative aimed to develop a 21st-century approach for conservation and outdoor recreation. Then-U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar described it as a model rooted in strong community support and collaboration. However, this vision lacked a critical component for addressing the region's pressing infrastructure challenges. Local organizations and communities were acutely aware that the Calumet Region faced persistent flooding, storm damage, and overwhelmed infrastructure caused by the region's unique geography and patterns of urbanization.

Recognizing these challenges, the MPC—with support from funders committed to the region—began exploring solutions in 2014. Early conversations facilitated by Foresight Design highlighted a significant gap: while many stakeholders were working on stormwater management, no platform existed to connect them or align their efforts toward shared goals.

The CSC was created to address this gap, providing a unique cross-sector space where organizations from public, private, and nonprofit sectors could collaborate, share knowledge, and coordinate efforts to manage stormwater effectively. At a time when cross-sector collaboration was rare, the CSC pioneered a community of practice that fostered trust, leveraged resources, and advanced an ambitious stormwater agenda, with Green Stormwater Infrastructure serving as a unifying tool to achieve collective impact in the Calumet Region.

Building on prior stormwater efforts, MPC led the creation of the CSC with the following objectives:

- **Convene stakeholders** from private, public, and nonprofit sectors to foster collaboration.
- **Build trust** among members to strengthen the foundation for collective action.
- **Increase awareness** of ongoing and emerging stormwater management initiatives.
- **Develop a shared language** within the community of practice to facilitate effective communication and alignment.
- **Establish common goals** and identify opportunities to align or develop projects for the collective benefit of the region.
- **Promote equity** by integrating awareness of equity issues into the language of urban flooding.

The CSC served as a platform where participants could leverage projects and resources to achieve meaningful regional benefits, advancing stormwater management solutions in the Calumet Region.

Who Was the Target Audience?

The CSC's initial outreach and membership efforts focused on engaging the following groups:

- **Government agencies:** The CSC focused on engaging directors of public works, water management professionals, and infrastructure operators. These individuals often had on-the-ground knowledge of stormwater systems and played a key role in implementing infrastructure solutions, setting policies, and maintaining the region's resilience.



- **Non-governmental organizations:** Environmental advocacy groups, community organizations, and nonprofit entities were brought into the collaborative to bring perspectives rooted in community needs, equity, and sustainability. Their participation helped ensure that stormwater solutions aligned with broader environmental and social goals.
- **State and regional agencies:** Agencies such as the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, and regional planning entities were included to provide high-level insights and align CSC initiatives with state and regional strategies. These agencies often provided critical funding, technical expertise, and regulatory guidance to inform stormwater management efforts.
- **Private-Sector Actors:** Engineering firms, consultants, and industry representatives brought technical knowledge and practical experience to the table. Their participation helped bridge the gap between planning and implementation, ensuring that innovative stormwater management techniques, such as green infrastructure, were feasible and effective.

MPC emphasized relationship-building with key decision-makers and policymakers across these groups to influence decisions and align resources effectively. While the CSC did not formalize membership with rigid definitions, regular meeting attendance signified active participation and involvement in the collaborative.

What Did Participation Look Like?

Participation in the CSC evolved alongside the dynamics of regional coalitions, reflecting the adaptability needed to address emerging challenges and opportunities. Since its inception in 2014, the CSC aimed to provide a consistent and reliable space for cross-sector engagement, knowledge sharing, and trust-building among its members. This inclusive approach allowed the collaborative to grow and adapt as new priorities and participants emerged.

In its early years, the CSC focused on convening influential stakeholders—such as representatives from public works departments, regional agencies, nonprofits, and private-sector consultants—who were instrumental in setting the agenda for regional stormwater management. Over time, participation expanded to include community organizations, environmental justice advocates, and students, underscoring an increased emphasis on equity and inclusion. Additionally, the CSC became a platform for cultivating and training a new generation of stormwater practitioners, further broadening its impact.

The shift to virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic enabled broader geographic participation and facilitated engagement with national speakers, enhancing the collaborative's reach and perspective. However, the absence of in-person interactions limited opportunities for relationship-building, highlighting the enduring importance of face-to-face connections in fostering trust and effective collaboration.

Major Efforts and Achievements

The CSC's most significant achievement has been the establishment of consistent, recurring meetings that effectively engaged regional stakeholders and built trust among them. This consistent engagement fostered a strong community of practice, enabling stakeholders to share knowledge, align efforts, and collectively address stormwater challenges in the Calumet Region.



The community of practice approach provided a foundation for achieving collective milestones across multiple key areas:

Collaborative Outcomes

The CSC delivered critical outcomes that improved the region's understanding of stormwater challenges and solutions:

Urban Flooding Baseline: Comprehensive documentation of urban flooding patterns across the Calumet Region, serving as a critical resource for prioritizing mitigation efforts.

Green Infrastructure Baseline Inventory (GIBI): A detailed regional inventory of green infrastructure initiatives, providing a roadmap for scaling and replicating successful projects.

Capacity Building

The CSC enhanced the region's capacity to manage stormwater through strategic planning and skill development:

- **Capacity Baseline:** An assessment documenting the ability of municipalities in the Calumet Region to manage, plan, and invest in stormwater solutions. This baseline established a foundation for strategically prioritizing future activities.
- **Workforce Development:** Training programs and certifications focused on green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) installation and maintenance, equipping local communities with the skills needed to implement sustainable solutions.

Pilot Projects

The CSC initiated pilot projects to translate collaborative strategies into actionable results:

- **Green Infrastructure Templates:** Development of regionally recognized guidelines for green stormwater infrastructure design, promoting consistent and effective practices.

Policy Influence

The CSC contributed to shaping regional policy frameworks by promoting best practices and innovative strategies:

- **Best Practices for GSI Design Standards:** Established regionally recognized guidelines.
- **White Paper on Shared Services:** An assessment of opportunities for collective procurement of GSI maintenance across jurisdictions, emphasizing collaboration to reduce costs and improve outcomes.

Evolution of the CSC (2014 to 2024)

To fully understand the CSC's impact, it's important to examine how the collaborative evolved over time. This evolution was shaped by the people and organizations involved at each phase, adapting to new challenges, opportunities, and strategies for collaboration. Insights from current and former staff highlight distinct phases in the CSC's journey.

Prior to 2014: Recognizing the Need for Collaboration

“Before 2014, the idea of having organizations coming together, sharing information about their projects was completely new. There was a misperception of competition that kept silos across the region. The CSC was able to take down these misperceptions and bring people together, building trust among them.”

- **Josh Ellis**, former Vice President

Before the CSC was established, the Calumet Region faced persistent stormwater challenges, with multiple organizations working independently on flooding issues. While meaningful efforts existed, they were fragmented, and the lack of coordination reduced their collective impact.

Defining Characteristics

- **Stakeholder Landscape:** The region had numerous stakeholders actively addressing flooding issues, but collaboration was minimal.
- **Identified Need:** Founders of stormwater initiatives recognized the importance of greater collaboration to maximize their work’s impact.
- **Barriers to Coordination:** Coalition-building and cross-sector collaboration were uncommon, and there was no standardized language around urban flooding or its connection to equity.

2014-2018: Building the Foundation

“You can’t underestimate the power of people meeting in person to build relationships. This is the catalyst for collaborative work. It’s important to regularly revisit the purpose and mission of the collaborative—to align and realign to that mission. Urban flooding and stormwater management are going to remain a key issue in our region—someone has to bring the best practices to tackle these challenges.”

- **Danielle Gallet**, former Director of Water Resources

During its early years, the CSC laid the groundwork for collaboration and coordination among its members. The focus was on creating a shared understanding of stormwater issues, building trust, and aligning efforts across the region.

Defining Characteristics

- **Recognition as a Regional Tool:** The CSC quickly became recognized as an essential platform for planning and coordination.
- **Collaboration Strategies:** Regular in-person meetings fostered strong networks and enabled high-level collaboration among influential stakeholders.



- **Key Achievements:** The CSC established recurring meetings, developed a standardized language around urban flooding, and introduced an equity framework that shaped future initiatives.

2019–2023: Adapting and Expanding

“Having resources built is not enough. Moving forward, the collaborative moving forward the collaborative must commit to bringing members together in partnership with municipalities to implement the tools and resources developed”
Justin Keller, Strategis Water Programs at Elevate. Former Manager at MPC.

Justin Keller, former Manager of Water Resources

As the CSC matured, it adapted to new dynamics, including shifts in participation and governance. A steering committee, formed in 2020, played a pivotal role in guiding the collaborative’s objectives and maintaining engagement. This period also saw the CSC responding to external challenges, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a shift to virtual meetings.

Defining Characteristics

- **Emergence of New Coalitions:** The collaborative evolved alongside the growing prevalence of coalition-based work in the region.
- **Steering Committee Leadership:** The formation of the steering committee sustained momentum and broadened engagement across stakeholders.
- **Key Challenges:** The pandemic prompted a shift to virtual meetings, which enabled participation from national speakers but diminished the energy and relationship-building benefits of in-person interactions.

2023–2024: Transitioning Leadership

“We’ve weathered the challenges of COVID and the transition from in-person to virtual collaboration. Collaboration, in-person learning, shared experiences, and the knowledge of how green infrastructure is delivering for local communities remains vital to tackling regional stormwater challenges.”

- **Ryan Wilson**, Senior Director, Water Program

In the most recent phase, the MPC began redefining CSC’s role in the region and building a strategic partnership with Friends of the Chicago River and the the Greater Chicago Watershed Alliance (GCWA). This transition marked a critical period of reflection and adaptation, as the Steering Committee sought to position CSC for long-term sustainability while continuing to advance its mission.

This phase included experimenting with post-pandemic meeting formats to balance virtual accessibility with the relationship-building benefits of in-person gatherings. Members and the steering committee



also assessed how the CSC's unique strengths—its collaborative culture and expertise in green infrastructure—could be leveraged to address emerging challenges in stormwater management.

Defining Characteristics

- **Redefining the Role:** Members and the steering committee began to reevaluate the CSC's purpose and explore opportunities to align its efforts with partners like GCWA.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** The group identified overlaps with regional initiatives, fostering synergies that could enhance collective impact.

Collaboration Strategies

- **Hybrid Meeting Formats:** The CSC experimented with hybrid formats to accommodate broader participation while retaining the benefits of face-to-face engagement. Virtual components enabled participation from a broader geographic audience, while in-person elements fostered relationship-building and facilitated deeper discussions among members.
- **Field Trips:** The reintroduction of field trips to project sites provided members with hands-on experiences and real-world insights into stormwater management initiatives. These site visits encouraged knowledge sharing, highlighted successful green infrastructure implementations, and strengthened the sense of community among participants.
- **Building Synergies:** Efforts were focused on aligning CSC initiatives with the broader goals of GCWA, ensuring a seamless transition and sustained momentum.

The CSC's work during this period laid the groundwork for its next chapter, ensuring that the collaborative remains a vital force in addressing stormwater challenges across the region.

Structural Growth and Adaptation

The Calumet Stormwater Collaborative has undergone significant changes in its administration and organization since its inception. These changes were driven by evolving stakeholder needs, external circumstances, and a growing understanding of the systemic challenges surrounding stormwater management in the Calumet Region. This section reflects on the CSC's structural evolution, the driving forces behind these changes, and their implications for its work.

Evolution of Work Planning

Early on, the CSC recognized that stakeholders needed a shared sense of purpose to guide their collective efforts. This led to the development of structured work plans, which adapted over time to address shifting priorities and challenges:

- **Annual Work Planning (2014–2016):** In its initial years, the CSC developed yearly plans to align activities with immediate regional needs, ensuring a clear and actionable roadmap for stakeholders.
- **Three-Year Work Plans (2016–2019):** Under Sarah Cardona's leadership, the CSC adopted longer-term planning. This approach enabled the collaborative to tackle systemic challenges more effectively and provided continuity for complex initiatives.
- **Pandemic Disruptions (2020–2021):** The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant obstacles to work plan implementation, including reduced participation and the challenges of virtual



engagement. These disruptions highlighted the importance of adaptability and resilience in collaborative planning.

- **Steering Committee Led (2022-2024):** Building on the establishment of a steering committee in 2020, this period marked a shift in how the CSC operated. The committee played a larger role in guiding the agenda, particularly as individual work groups either concluded their efforts or began operating independently, like the Training and Maintenance work group.

Despite the development of these plans, challenges in implementation persisted, underscoring the importance of sustained engagement, leadership continuity, and resource alignment to achieve the CSC's goals.

Key Challenges

Throughout its evolution, the CSC faced several recurring challenges that tested its ability to achieve its mission and sustain its impact:

- **Sustaining Participation:** Maintaining consistent engagement from local stakeholders was a persistent hurdle. Competing priorities, limited resources, and turnover among participating organizations often made it difficult to keep stakeholders actively involved in CSC activities over the long term.
- **Logistic and Financial Hurdles:** Collaborative initiatives often faced obstacles related to funding, coordination, and resource allocation. These challenges included securing sufficient financial support for projects, managing the logistical complexities of multi-stakeholder efforts, and ensuring equitable access to resources among diverse participants.
- **Leadership Continuity:** Stable and effective leadership was essential to advancing the CSC's mission. However, changes in key personnel, both within MPC and member organizations, occasionally disrupted momentum and required the collaborative to recalibrate its approach to maintain progress.

Funding and sustaining the CSC

As a nonprofit organization, the Metropolitan Planning Council facilitated and provided administrative support for the CSC through the generous contributions of foundation and corporate donors. These gifts enabled MPC to sustain the collaborative and its initiatives over the years.

The CSC also greatly benefited from the dedicated efforts of key staff from many member organizations. While their pro-bono contributions are too extensive to list individually, they were instrumental in the CSC's success and are gratefully acknowledged as the foundation of its achievements.

The following organizations played a significant role in funding and supporting the growth of the CSC:

- The Boeing Company
- The Chicago Community Trust
- Cleveland-Cliffs Steel (formerly ArcelorMittal)
- Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation
- Grand Victoria Foundation
- The Joyce Foundation
- Illinois Department of Natural Resources



- John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- McDougal Family Foundation
- Prince Charitable Trusts
- SmithGroup
- Surdna Foundation

These organizations provided essential support that enabled the CSC to advance its mission in the Calumet Region.

Best Practices and Recommendations

Over the years, the MPC has gained valuable insights from the successes and challenges of the CSC. These insights have been distilled into best practices, emphasizing community engagement, knowledge sharing, and collaboration. These lessons have been distilled into best practices, emphasizing the importance of community engagement, knowledge sharing, and collaboration. By adhering to these principles, the CSC and similar initiatives can sustain momentum, achieve meaningful outcomes, and better serve their communities. Based on surveys, group discussions, and reflections from CSC members conducted over the past two years, the following key thematic practices and recommendations emerged:

Community Engagement and Commitment:

- **Mission Alignment:** Regularly revisit and refine the collaborative's mission to maintain focus and relevance.
- **Equity and Impact:** Prioritize serving communities most affected by urban flooding, ensuring that equity remains a cornerstone of all initiatives.

Knowledge Sharing and Learning:

- **External Inspiration:** Continuously integrate national and international best practices, tailoring them to local needs to enhance regional resilience.
- **Action-Oriented Engagement:** Transition from purely educational meetings to collaborative sessions focused on achieving actionable outcomes. Partner with municipalities to drive tangible progress.

Collaboration:

- **In-Person Collaboration:** Foster relationship-building and strengthen collaborative efforts through face-to-face meetings.

Looking Ahead

As the CSC transitions to become a work group of the Greater Chicago Watershed Alliance (GCWA), this retrospective marks both an endpoint and a new beginning. The CSC has already achieved its foundational goal of creating a collaborative space for learning, coordination, and trust-building among individuals and organizations working to improve stormwater management in the Calumet Region. This culture of collaboration—a rarity a decade ago—has become a hallmark of the CSC and has inspired similar water-related initiatives across the region.



By fostering shared understanding, aligning projects, and prioritizing green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) and other nature-based solutions, the CSC has demonstrated that collective action can deliver meaningful regional benefits. Moving forward, the CSC's integration into GCWA opens new opportunities to build on these achievements while addressing pressing challenges, including climate change, aging infrastructure, and urban flooding. Maintaining a mission-driven approach, strengthening collaborative networks, and embedding equity as a guiding principle will be critical to success.

About MPC

Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) is an independent planning and policy organization working to address regional built environment issues through a racial and economic justice lens. MPC partners with communities, businesses, and government to advance policy and drive systemic change toward a more racially equitable and economically just Chicago region. MPC is committed to shaping a Chicago region where every community is valued, every person has a voice, and every neighborhood thrives.