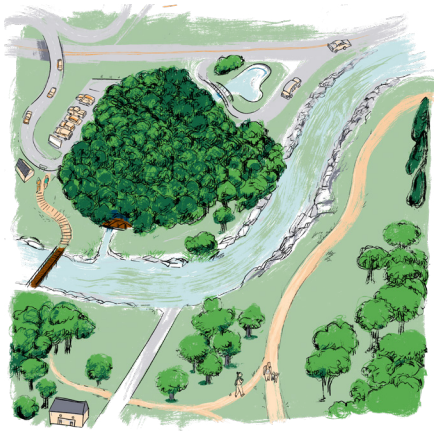
This document is part of MPC's 'Understanding Our Rivers' research project, which notes how the Chicago river system and its surrounding communities have changed over time. Consistent with the project structure, the findings are organized into the themes of inviting, productive, and living.



Understanding the Des Plaines River (Reach 6)



This reach includes the Des Plaines River. Bounded by W. Belmont Avenue on the south and Higgins Road on the north, setting the border of the City of Chicago with Franklin Park. The overall length is 4.3 miles with significant amounts of river edge located in Forest Preserve of Cook County land, like Schiller Woods. It touches the O'Hare community area. This reach is characterized by forest preserves and the natural river corridor along Chicago's northwestern edge. While adjacent to major transportation infrastructure and the O'Hare community area, the reach is defined primarily by its ecological character and open green spaces.

KEY TO ICONS

Increasing | Decreasing | Same or Similar | Good | Fair | Poor

How has the area changed over time?

(2014-2022)

Demographics

The population in the Des Plaines river tract remained stable between 2014 and 2022. The population of this reach is relatively small, with just under 7,000 residents, so relatively small changes in the population show a large percentage change.

Population change along Reach 6 (Des Plaines)

	Total population (2014)	Total population (2022)	% Change in population	# Change in population
River tracts - Reach 6	6,800	6,913	1.7%	113
River adjacent tracts - Reach 6	20,161	20,292	0.7%	131
Citywide river tracts	322,090	346,447	7.6%	24,357
All tracts citywide	2,712,209	2,721,126	0.3%	8,917

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2010-2014 and 2018-2022 Five-Year Estimates

The most notable population change by racial and ethnic group is an increase in the number of Asian residents along the river, which increased by more than 1,000 people, while the population remained steady in adjacent tracts.

Population change by race and ethnicity along Reach 6 (Des Plaines)

	% Change in total population (2014-2022)	# Change in total population (2014-2022)	% Change in Black population	# Change in Black population	% Change in white population	# Change in white population	% Change in Latinx population	# Change in Latinx population	% Change in Asian population	# Change in Asian population
River tracts - Reach 6	1.7%	113	220.6%	196	−27.6%	−1,500	45.6%	205	218.6%	1,268
River adjacent tracts - Reach 6	0.7%	131	219.5%	571	−10.9%	−1,655	24.2%	733	13.9%	175
Citywide river tracts	7.6%	24,357	−0.4%	−156	6.5%	9,326	−5.8%	−5,049	37.5%	16,549
All tracts citywide	0.3%	8,917	−9.5%	−81,381	2.1%	18,473	0.4%	2,784	22.1%	34,061

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2010-2014 and 2018-2022 Five-Year Estimates

Socioeconomics

The median household income, rent, and home value in the Des Plaines reach all mirror the household income and costs citywide. However, the rate in which these costs increased varied.

The Des Plaines reach saw the greatest increase in home values (63%) and household income (72%) of the reaches between (2014 and 2022). By 2022, home values along the river surpassed the home values of homes further from the river in adjacent tracts. Rental costs, however, increased much slower, at 18%, and were the same near the river and adjacent tracts, meaning rental costs along the river followed neighborhood trends.

Changes in household incomes, rents, and home values along Reach 6 (Des Plaines)

	Average median HH income (2014)	Average median HH income (2022)	% Change in average HH income	Average median rent (2014)	Average median rent (2022)	% Change in average median rent	Average median home value (2014)	Average median home value (2022)	% Change in average median home value
River tracts - Reach 6	$45,036	$77,395	71.9%	$1,110	$1,309	18.0%	$201,550	$328,098	62.8%
River adjacent tracts - Reach 6	$62,881	$84,212	33.9%	$1,019	$1,392	36.6%	$231,550	$289,575	25.1%
Citywide river tracts	$60,888	$92,926	52.6%	$1,081	$1,499	38.6%	$279,536	$384,242	37.5%
All tracts citywide	$49,019	$73,178	49.3%	$992	$1,316	32.6%	$239,511	$328,859	37.3%

HH stands for Household
Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2010-2014 and 2018-2022 Five-Year Estimates



Land Use

Thanks to extensive Cook County Forest Preserves space, the land along the Des Plaines river reach is overwhelmingly open space, taking up a 77% share of land. Unlike reaches in the Chicago River and the Calumet, this reach has no industrial land uses along the river. The area saw a slight gain in multifamily land use, by about 20 acres, as well as a slight increase in institutional uses by about 61 acres.

Land uses along the Des Plaines reach
The share of each tract grouping's total land area comprised of each land use category in 2020

	% share SF residential	% share MF residential	% share commercial	% share industrial	% share institutional	% share open space	% share transportation	% share ROW	% share utility and waste	% share vacant
River tracts	5.6%	3.9%	6.4%	0.0%	7.2%	76.7%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
River adjacent tracts	64.2%	10.8%	2.0%	0.0%	1.4%	18.6%	0.0%	2.7%	0.0%	0.1%
Citywide river tracts	16.5%	10.8%	10.4%	16.7%	6.4%	9.9%	10.9%	10.2%	4.6%	3.3%
All tracts citywide	32.2%	15.8%	14.2%	9.0%	8.0%	5.4%	4.1%	6.8%	1.2%	3.2%

Excludes the following land use categories: "Other Residential" and "Non-Parcel or Unclassified." SF stands for Single-Family; MF stands for Multi-Family, ROW stands for Right-of-Way.
Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Land Use Inventory (2020)

Land use changes along the Des Plaines reach
The change or difference in the share of each tract grouping's total land area comprised of each land use category from 2010 to 2020

	% change SF residential	% change MF residential	% change commercial	% change industrial	% change institutional	% change open space	% change transportation	% change ROW	% change utility and waste	% change vacant
River tracts	-0.6%	1.2%	-0.1%	0.0%	3.6%	-4.1%	-0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
River adjacent tracts	1.0%	-0.1%	-0.4%	0.0%	-1.5%	-0.3%	0.0%	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Citywide river tracts	-0.2%	0.6%	-0.8%	0.1%	0.7%	1.5%	-1.1%	1.8%	-0.2%	-1.8%
All tracts citywide	0.1%	0.1%	3.8%	-0.7%	0.7%	-0.3%	-4.2%	1.2%	0.0%	-0.4%

These percentages reflect percentage point changes, or the difference in the share of each tract groupings that are comprised of each land use category. Excludes the following land use categories: "Other Residential" and "Non-Parcel or Unclassified." SF stands for Single-Family; MF stands for Multi-Family, ROW stands for Right-of-Way.
Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Land Use Inventory (2020)

Physical Improvements

The Des Plaines reach has great trail access primarily through the Des Plaines River Trail. The unpaved trail does not always follow directly along the river, so it covers about 42% of the river's edge, but it is a connected trail that covers the entire stretch of the Des Plaines reach and beyond, about 16 miles.

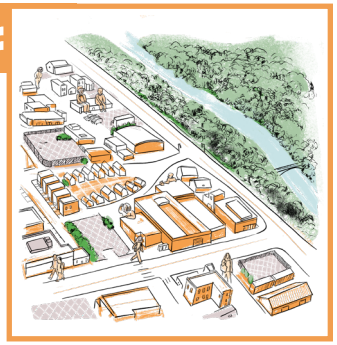
The Forest Preserves of Cook County have partnered with communities along the Des Plaines to make major improvements to the trail system over the past decades. The American Indian Center and local partners, as part of the Our Great Rivers Initiative, established the Northwest Trail Outdoor Museum.

Access to trails along Chicago's river system

	Length of existing trail (ft)	Length of river edge (ft)	% Share of river edge with a trail	# Total river trail access points
Citywide river edge	245	669	37.0%	313
Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore)	129	132	98.0%	43
Reach 2 (North Branch/Goose Island)	33	84	40.0%	186
Reach 3 (Main Stem Downtown)	23	38	60.0%	58
Reach 4 (South Branch)	17	90	18.0%	17
Reach 5 (Calumet)	14	258	6.0%	4
Reach 6 (Des Plaines)	28	67	42.0%	5

Source: Chicago Department of Transportation, Chicago River Edge Access Study (2024)

Productive Rivers Data



Office, Industrial, and Multifamily Development

There are few office and multifamily properties, and no industrial properties on the Des Plaines reach. The average sale price ($71) and rental cost ($20) per square foot of office and multifamily property within two blocks of the river is lower than the citywide average in this reach. Vacancy rates for office and multifamily properties (meaning units in existing buildings that are not occupied) sit at 15% in 2025, a nearly 8 percentage point increase since 2015.

Vacancy

The rate of vacant parcels, meaning an empty lot without a building, is very low in the Des Plaines reach. In 2022 there were just four vacant lots along the river in this reach.

Change in vacancies along Reach 6 (Des Plaines)

	Total vacant parcels (2014)	Total vacant parcels (2022)	% Share of parcels vacant (2014)	% Share of parcels vacant (2022)	% Change in vacant parcels	# Change in vacant parcels
River tracts - Reach 6	3	4	0.3%	0.4%	33.3%	1
River adjacent tracts - Reach 6	21	19	0.4%	0.4%	−9.5%	−2
Citywide river tracts	4,562	4,396	6.3%	6.1%	−3.6%	−166
All tracts citywide	32,227	33,712	5.3%	5.6%	4.6%	1,485

Source: Cook County Assessor's Office (2014 and 2022)

Jobs and Businesses

The Des Plaines reach and the South Branch reach are the only reaches that saw a decline in jobs between 2012 and 2021. The job loss was relatively low, at just 260 jobs, a 2% decrease. Jobs increased in adjacent tracts, indicating the decrease in jobs was specifically located along the river. The number of businesses decreased at similar rates along the river and in adjacent tracts, following the citywide trend.

Change in businesses and jobs along Reach 6 (Des Plaines)

	Total businesses (2013)	Total businesses (2023)	% Change in total businesses	# Change in total businesses	Total jobs (2012)	Total jobs (2021)	% Change in total jobs	# Change in total jobs
River tracts - Reach 6	195	125	−35.9%	−70	13,893	13,631	−1.9%	−262
River adjacent tracts - Reach 6	115	80	−30.4%	−35	1,857	2,472	33.1%	615
Citywide river tracts	14,629	10,106	−30.9%	−4,523	651,406	712,116	9.3%	60,710
All tracts citywide	56,115	42,171	−24.8%	−13,944	1,279,376	1,320,135	3.2%	40,759

Source: City of Chicago data portal business licenses (2013 and 2023); U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (2012 and 2021)



Water Quality

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) does not collect data on fish in the Des Plaines reach, but does monitor combined sewer overflows (CSOs). The Des Plaines reach experiences relatively few CSO events each year. The reach had 152 events between 2016 and 2021. The number of CSO events has declined over time with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District's (MWRD) efforts in the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP), that built large, deep tunnels and reservoirs that store stormwater and sewage until it can be treated, mitigating CSO events. The TARP reservoirs that affect this reach are the McCook Reservoir and the Gloria Alitto Majewski Reservoir. The first stage of the McCook Reservoir began operations in 2017. It is located between the Des Plaines River and Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal in Bedford Park, and captures stormwater along the Des Plaines River, Salt Creek, Addison Creek, and the Chicago River from the North Branch and North Shore Channel, through the Main Steam, South Branch, Bubbly Creek, to the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. This first stage of the McCook reservoir was designed to contain up to 3.5 billion gallons. The second stage, set to be completed in 2032, has capacity for an additional 6.5 billion gallons. The Gloria Alitto Majewski Reservoir was completed in 1998 and captures sewage and stormwater in the Upper Des Plaines River. The tunnels and reservoirs built under TARP have played a major role in reducing CSOs in Chicago's water system. The number of CSOs notably declined across all Chicago river reaches and the Des Plaines reach after the McCook Reservoir became operational in 2017. CSO events are complex: the severity of each event depends on the location, amount of impervious surfaces that exacerbate runoff, weather conditions, and other factors. Our region has not seen a complete elimination of CSO events, and some years continue to see more severe CSOs than others. It is important to continue to make ongoing efforts to reduce stormwater runoff and mitigate CSO events, as the effects of climate change, such as the heavy rainfall events we saw in the summer of 2026, continue to pose pollution and flooding challenges to the Chicago region.

Combined sewer overflows along Chicago's river system

The total number of Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) across all outfall locations along Chicago's river system by reach, 2016 to 2021

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	# Total CSOs (2016-2021)	% Change in total CSOs (2016-2021)
City of Chicago	1,025	1,879	601	494	244	33	4,276	−97%
Reach 1 - North Branch/North Shore	161	197	61	44	12	0	475	−100%
Reach 2 - North Branch/Goose Island	462	923	218	238	113	8	1,962	−98%
Reach 3 - Main Stem Downtown	122	234	36	39	1	3	435	−98%
Reach 4 - South Branch	248	484	264	153	90	12	1,251	−95%
Reach 5 - Calumet	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0%
Reach 6 - Des Plaines	32	40	22	20	28	10	152	−69%

Source: Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Chicago, processed by The Field Museum

Fish biodiversity along Chicago's river system	# Total species of fish
Reach 1 (North Branch/North Shore) - Albany Ave	4
Reach 2 (North Branch/Goose Island) - Wilson Ave	19
Reach 2 (North Branch/Goose Island) - Diversey Pkwy	14
Reach 3 (Main Stem Downtown) - Wells St	No Data
Reach 4 (South Branch) - Loomis St	14
Reach 4 (South Branch) - Archer Ave	No Data
Reach 4 (South Branch) - Cicero Ave	29
Reach 5 (Calumet) - Halsted St	19
Reach 5 (Calumet) - Indiana Ave	22
Reach 6 (Des Plaines)	No Data

Fish species diversity is based on the annual average of each station between 2016 to 2021. Albany and Wilson Ave stations sit near the border between reach 1 and 2. The MWRD does not monitor fish species diversity in reach 3 or 6.

Source: Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, GeoHub.

Open Space

The Des Plaines River reach is largely composed of open space, with approximately 77% of the surrounding land protected as forest preserve. These connected natural areas provide important habitat for wildlife, support biodiversity, and offer opportunities for people to experience nature through trails, recreation, and environmental education.

Change in open space land use along Reach 6 (Des Plaines)	% Share open space (2010)	% Share open space (2020)	% Change in share open space	# Change in acres of open space
River tracts - Reach 6	80.8%	76.7%	−4.1%	−69
River adjacent tracts - Reach 6	18.9%	18.6%	−0.3%	−3
Citywide river tracts	8.4%	9.8%	1.4%	384
All tracts citywide	5.7%	5.4%	−0.3%	−346

The % change in open space reflects the percentage point change, or the difference in the share of each tract groupings that were comprised of open space land use between 2010 and 2020.
Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning Land Use Inventory (2010 and 2020)

Methodology

Research Approach
This project examined how areas (census tracts) along the river changed over time, from approximately 2015 to 2025. Data related to demographic, socioeconomic, and development changes, and ecological and river quality changes, were compiled to understand how areas along the river evolved over the decade. Trends/variables included:

- Population changes by racial and ethnic group
- Rent and home value changes
- Job, business, and vacancy rate changes
- Land uses
- Trails and access points
- Community projects and activations
- Fish count and water quality changes

In addition to breaking down the river geography at the citywide and "reach"-level scale, we examined data by census tracts based on their proximity to the river:

- River tracts: Census tracts that touch a river in the City of Chicago
- River adjacent tracts: Tracts that touch the "river tracts." Data in these tracts act as a proxy to the nearby neighborhood in order to differentiate general neighborhood trends from findings that are unique to tracts that directly abut the river.

Research Questions
For each data area, we asked the following questions, which allow for a nuanced look at how river areas have developed, when compared to other parts of the city:

- How do trends/changes compare across specific river areas (aka "reach areas")?
- How do trends/changes along the river compare to changes in areas immediately adjacent to river census tracts (i.e. comparison group)?
- How do trends/changes along the river compare to changes across the city as a whole (all city census tracts)?