The Dream

No place in more endearment of Chicago than its majestic lakefront. A feature in any postcard of the city’s skyline, the Chicago lakefront is known around the world for its beauty, accessibility, and public ownership.

The dream of a fine, public lakefront open to all has been a compelling one since Chicago’s founding. Citizens have tirelessly sought to expand that amenity. Significant conversations, poorly received, powered outlooks, and even nature itself were used to prop the idea that Chicago’s lakefront—all of it—belongs to the public.

Lincoln Park, Grant Park, Burnham Park, Jackson Park, Rainbow Beach, and Calumet Park—all were created by the people of Chicago. A rare and public parkland stretch for a full 26 miles along the edges of the lake, a shining example of the dedicated work of our predecessors.

Today, the same legacy of Chicago’s founders must remain uncompromised. Chicago’s public parkland remains a linear park space that is univalved in the entire Great Lakes Basin. When other waterfront communities sought to fend off development, Chicagoans dedicated themselves to creating a boundless public lakefront. The south is a linear, unbroken, public landscape upon which we can build.

The History

Chicago’s magnificent public lakefront parks exist today because of the vision of the city’s founders and a continuing civic commitment to the value of public open space along Lake Michigan.

Chicago’s devotion to its lakefront began even before the city was incorporated in 1830. In the original survey plat designated the land east of Michigan Avenue “beaver, open clear and free.” When the E. Branch line was laid a few years later, citizens requested a park “accessible at all times to the people.”

A crusade in the 1860s to connect the city’s lakefrontsceney into a public park was followed in 1862 by the creation of Lincoln Park. Through landfill and land purchase, Lincoln Park grew to 1,050 to 2,000 acres across the north lakefront. Along the south lakefront, Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham, envisioned a city that would not only be affluent and architecturally accomplished, but one whose beauty would draw visitors from the world. Burnham envisioned a linear park stretching from the end of Grant Park to beyond the city’s shores.

The “Lakefront by right belong to the people,” wrote Burnham. “Not a foot of its shores should be appropriated to the exclusion of the people.”

Generations of Chicagoans have enjoyed the benefits of this bold idea. Between 1901 and 1935, some 2,000 acres of new lakefront parkland were carefully landscaped and shaped, reuniting south to create Burnham Park and beyond to include Rainbow Beach, and north to Hollywood Ave., the northern boundary of Lincoln Park.

Burnham’s vision of a public lakefront soon became part of the city’s unique character. The 1973 Lake Michigan and Chicago Lakefront Promotion Ordinance set as a commons goal to “transform the public-owned and locally controlled park system along the entire Chicago lakefront.”

The mission of Chicago’s lakefronts from rail and commercial development to public accomplishment. Most Great Lakes and coastal cities have devoted their waterfronts mainly to commercial and industrial uses. Thanks to our visionary and courageous predecessors, Chicago’s lakefront is open and accessible lakefront, with its many beaches, harbors, walkways, marinas, and public lands. This is a place that all Chicagoans can enjoy.

The Last Four Miles Initiative

To advance Chicago’s watchdogs of centrals public lakefront, Friends of the Parks began the Last Four Miles initiative in 2004, bringing together leaders to outline their vision and discuss the exciting possibilities of completing lakefront parks. To this end, Friends of the Parks, in collaboration with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood Ave. on the North Side, in cooperation with the Evanston Border to Hollywood A
Calumet Park is expanded with 140 additional acres, offering more places to run and to play. Quieter, more contemplative areas would be created adjacent to the lake. To increase parkland and improve lake access from the former U.S. Steel site, new beach and lagoon areas will be created between 79th and the Calumet River. The existing site, elevated several feet above the water, offers no lake access.

A promontory at the north end of the U.S. Steel site offers new recreational areas and views of the lakefront and downtown skyline.

New parkland and beach edges use naturalistic landscaping to create wildlife and aquatic habitat and to provide educational opportunities.

Benefits of the Last Four Miles
- Adds almost 500 acres of new parks and beaches for neighborhoods that don’t have enough parkland.
- Completes a single lakefront-long park to link the city together.
- Increases property values along the newly created parks.
- Encourages new small businesses in the vicinity.
- Extends the lakefront trail for walkers, runners, and cyclists—now 15 miles across the north and to the Indiana border on the south.
- Creates new commercial jobs to build the parks.
- Promotes the shoreline from monkeys and seagulls.
- Establishes new aquatic and wildlife habitat.

The Concept Plan
Based on community visioning sessions and charrettes, the Last Four Miles professional design team—after review with ecological and engineering experts—produced this concept plan. Guiding the effort were:

The Last Four Miles Planning Principles
- Public access along Lake Michigan from Evanston to Indiana
- More parkland and beaches
- Community-based planning effort
- Completion of a continuous lakefront trail
- Connection corridors to the lake
- Creation of habitat and improvements of Lake Michigan coastal ecosystems
- Preservation of cultural history
- Attention to previous and current open-space and greenway planning efforts

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