



Chicago Park District Sustainability Report:

Parks Are Making Chicago a Greener City

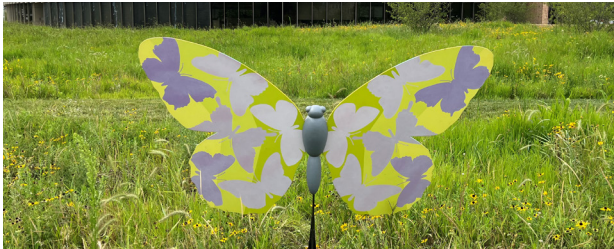




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A Letter

*from General Superintendent
& CEO Rosa Escareño*

Dear Chicago Community,

I am so excited to share the first ever Chicago Park District Sustainability Report “Parks Are Making Chicago A Greener City”. This report provides an overview of our agency’s dedicated efforts to responsibly manage resources, ensuring that our parks and facilities continue to enrich our communities’ quality of life for generations to come.

As the leading greening steward in the city, our park system serves as a vital lifeline for Chicagoans, particularly as we navigate a changing climate. Our beaches, pools, spray features, green spaces, and magnificent tree canopy offer essential respite from increasingly warming summers. Our diverse programs, green technology and practices provide Chicagoans opportunities to connect with one another, strengthen community bonds, and enhance neighborhood well-being.

Our efforts to promote sustainability aim to create more equitable access to a thriving, healthy environment across the city. Our recently launched 2025-2030 Strategic Plan underscores that environmental sustainability is a cornerstone of our mission, vision, values, and goals. This report specifically calls out our efforts to invest in resilient, sustainable park infrastructure, reduce waste, improve air quality, and continue our commitment to stewarding natural resources.

I invite you to join us as we make Chicago a greener city and to do your part, no matter how small, to ensure our park system and neighborhoods can continue to thrive for generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rosa Escareño".

Let's get started with an **Introduction**

This report highlights the many ways that the Chicago Park District works to advance environmental sustainability and resilience across the city. It is guided by our recently released 2025-2030 Strategic Plan, which was developed through a comprehensive process incorporating in-depth analysis of resident needs, park usage data, employee feedback, and national best practices. This report is organized into four sections that provide an overview of our work to build sustainability into our operations, land management, programming and partnerships. Read on to see a summary of our work and specific examples that showcase our impacts. The report also represents a step forward in our ongoing journey to improve how we manage our parks sustainably. In the coming year, we will continue to assess our operations to determine the best opportunities for continued growth and improvement in our efforts to make Chicago a greener, more resilient and more equitable city.

DID YOU KNOW?

As articulated in our Strategic Plan, the Chicago Park District's mission is: *to give people of all ages, identities, and abilities access to quality recreation, wellness opportunities, and sustainable green spaces in every neighborhood.*

To move the needle on sustainability, we are focused on the following goal outlined in the strategic plan: *A Greener City: Responsibly manage resources for long-term environmental resiliency.*



By the Numbers



*Nearly 9,000 acres
of parkland*

20% growth in acreage
since the year 2000



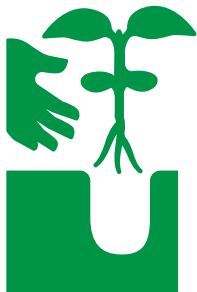
84

Building
Automation
Systems



41%

Outdoor lighting
upgraded to LED



In 2024, more than 3,500
volunteers completed
approximately

20,000 hours
of stewardship work at
415 workdays across
41 park natural areas

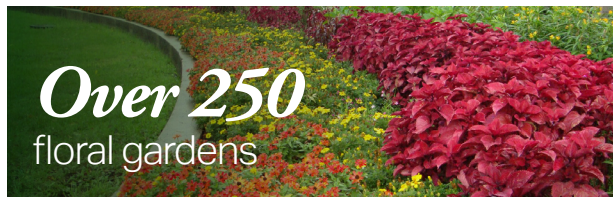


26
miles of lakefront



Nearly 2,000

acres of natural areas
from 250 acres in 2010
to 1,951 acres in 2025



Over 250
floral gardens



2.5 acres
of nature under
glass in the
Conservatories

Over 83,000 people

participated in environmental
education events & programs in 2024

6,600
in school
field trips

13,000
at nature
center
programs



31,000

at citywide programs such as
fishing, camping and paddling

33,000

in nature programs
at Garfield Park
Conservatory

DID YOU KNOW?

The seal of the Chicago Park District contains the phrase *HORTUS IN URBE* — Garden in a City. This is a reference to the motto *URBS IN HORTO* — City in a Garden — on the seal of the City of Chicago.



Section 1:

Operating & Building Responsibly

41%
outdoor lighting
upgraded to LED

Indoor lighting retrofits
complete at over
100 facilities



The Park District manages over 600 parks and 250 staffed fieldhouses across 9,000 acres of parkland. Sustainability is a core value that we strive to achieve across our operations.



Improving Energy Efficiency

The Park District uses energy to power fieldhouses and provide lighting for park roads, paths, and sports fields. To offset our energy usage, we purchase renewable energy credits equal to 100% of our electricity consumption; this allows us to support sustainable energy sources, such as solar and wind. To reduce energy consumption, we are converting our light fixtures across the Park District to energy efficient LED bulbs. To date, we have converted over 41% of our outdoor light fixtures along with indoor lighting at over 100 facilities. We also conducted energy audits on many of our buildings. As a result of the audits, we upgraded many mechanical systems to more efficient technologies, including Building Automation Systems (BAS) in 84 of our facilities, which allow our engineers to reduce energy use remotely when people are not occupying a building. The Park District also saves money through rebates we receive for our energy efficiency initiatives from both ComEd and Peoples Gas.



Conserving Water

The Park District uses water in many ways, including: fixtures in our 250 fieldhouses, filling our 77 swimming pools, maintaining 20 lagoons, and supporting a large network of drinking fountains across the city. We look for opportunities to reduce water consumption wherever we can. The Park District does not irrigate most lawns and allows them to go dormant during dry conditions. Additionally, we maintain some of our gardens with stormwater captured in rain barrels and have installed user-activated drinking fountains and spray features throughout our parks, replacing older features that ran continuously.



DID YOU KNOW?

Energy-related retrofits reduce the Park District's carbon emissions. For example, at La Villita Park in the Little Village Community, we converted the 98 flood lights that illuminate our soccer and baseball fields to LED bulbs — and this cut the energy use per fixture by 900 watts. Each year, the reduction in carbon emissions associated with these energy savings is equivalent to removing 26 cars from the road.



Building a Greener City

For over 20 years, new construction and renovation of park facilities has followed green building practices. Since 2010, 14 new facilities achieved LEED certification through the US Green Building Council, and an additional 30 facilities were built or renovated in accordance with the Chicago Sustainability Matrix. Our efforts to build green continue with projects currently under way, such as construction of a new fieldhouse at Jackie Robinson Park, and renovations of field houses at Clarendon Community Center, Kelvyn Park, and Blackhawk Park.

Reducing Waste

To cut down on the amount of waste we produce, the Park District is minimizing consumption and reusing or recycling materials across our operations. For example, when Park District forestry staff remove trees due to disease or storm damage, we safely reuse the wood for mulch, lumber, and nature play space components. During construction, we work to reduce the amount of material that ends up in a landfill by reusing excess soil on site or transporting it to another Park District project. We have banned the use of Styrofoam at events and concessions in the parks, and we provide recycling bins in every park and fieldhouse. Additionally, we have significantly reduced our paper consumption by digitizing many internal business operations.



Addressing Environmental Hazards

To help keep Chicagoans safe from harms that may exist in our environment, the Park District carefully manages and disposes of regulated wastes like fuel and paints, removes hazardous materials from buildings and landscapes, and provides protections from damaging climate change impacts. Beginning in 2023, we hired additional plumbers specifically to aid in the replacement of lead water lines in parks, which has allowed us to triple our work rate. Replacing these lines is a large and costly undertaking that the Park District has been tackling for many years. The Park District also has a comprehensive annual drinking water testing program to ensure that drinking water in our parks is lead free. As our climate changes, Chicago is experiencing the hazardous impacts of more extreme storm and heat events. Parks can offer physical relief from excessive heat with shade trees, covered seating areas, and water features like splash pads and pools. Additionally, park trees and plants can help mitigate urban heat island impacts and alleviate flooding by slowing down the flow of stormwater and absorbing it through their root systems.



Supporting Sustainable Business Practices

The Park District works with sustainability-minded companies to manage some of the larger assets and events in our parks. Soldier Field, the first existing NFL stadium to be LEED certified, is one such asset, where green cleaning products are used, EV charging stations are available, and recycling is heavily promoted. Large special events in parks are also encouraged to implement sustainability measures. For example, the Bank of America Chicago Marathon, a major international event that starts and ends in Grant Park, is an exceptionally sustainable operation that has been recognized with “Evergreen Inspire” status by the Council for Responsible Sport.



Using Environmentally Friendly Equipment

Park development and operations rely on a variety of fuel-intensive equipment and materials. To minimize environmental impacts, especially greenhouse gas emissions, the Park District uses greener options where available. Since 2014, we have been experimenting with biodiesel blends — made from used restaurant grease and byproducts from agriculture — to fuel trucks and landscape maintenance equipment. Our lakefront landscape mowers, tractors, and beach groomers run on a biodiesel blend. In addition, several of our refuse trucks now run on 100% biodiesel, which is carbon neutral and reduces the amount of particulate air pollution that is harmful for people with asthma. And, instead of diesel-powered tools, our landscape and forestry crews are phasing in more energy efficient battery-powered chainsaws, lawnmowers, and leaf blowers.

DID YOU KNOW?

In the summer of 2024, the Park District constructed a new walking track at Jesse Owens Park in the South Side community of Calumet Heights that also helps manage stormwater. The track is made of porous asphalt, an innovative material that meets ADA standards for stability and firmness while allowing rain to pass through rather than run off. This technology helps to reduce flooding, which is a growing problem in many parts of the city due to the increased frequency and intensity of rainstorms associated with climate change.



DID YOU KNOW?

Upgrading mechanical systems in older buildings and installing Building Automation Systems reduces our energy consumption. For example, a recent project to renovate the HVAC system and install a BAS system at the Calumet Park Field House, originally built in 1924, resulted in an 88% reduction in natural gas usage.



Section 2:

Caring for Nature in the City

Close to 9,000 *2,000*
acres of parkland acres of natural areas

Sustainability is at the core of what we do as the stewards of public open space in Chicago. From picnic groves and floral gardens to natural areas and beaches, our efforts support a healthy, dynamic natural environment that is resilient in the face of climate change.



Improving Ecological Conditions

The Park District manages nearly 2,000 acres of native habitat in more than 100 natural areas spread out across the city. Nearly a quarter of Chicago's parkland is managed as natural area, and the Park District is recognized as a leader in our efforts to reclaim natural spaces in an urban environment. Our natural areas showcase the ecosystem types that existed in the Chicago region prior to development, including prairies, savannas, woodlands, wetlands, and dunes. The city has very little remnant native habitat, so the Park District has actively established natural areas by planting a wide variety of native plants, shrubs, and trees while simultaneously controlling the weeds and invasive species that have crept in over time.

Our natural areas provide important habitat for wildlife that live in Chicago and for the thousands of migratory species that pass through our region. They also provide valuable ecosystem services and serve as important respites for Chicago residents to experience and connect with nature in their own neighborhoods. At the core of the sustainability of the Park District's natural areas is their ability to function naturally or mimic natural processes. In some cases, the removal of man-made structures has restored natural functions — like at River Park, where Chicago's last remaining dam was demolished in 2018, restoring habitat connectivity on the North Branch of the Chicago River for fish and other aquatic wildlife.



DID YOU KNOW?

Over the past five years, several pairs of federally endangered Great Lakes piping plovers have successfully nested at Montrose Beach Dunes, a Park District natural area on the city's north lakefront. Attracted to the sparsely vegetated beach surrounded by native dune habitat, conditions the Park District deliberately created, piping plovers have discovered and then returned to this oasis to reproduce and raise chicks — a true conservation success story. A dedicated group of volunteers monitors the beach each spring to track the plovers' activities.



DID YOU KNOW?

The benefits of native plants run deep – literally! Some native plants have roots that can extend 16 feet below the soil surface, which means that more of a plant can be below ground than above. Park District natural areas are characterized by native plants of all types. Our dune natural areas, dotted along the city's lakefront, are anchored by clumps of native marram grass, whose strong roots grab on to sand, thereby reducing beach erosion and increasing coastal resiliency to wave action. The deep roots of many native plants in our prairie and woodland natural areas help stem erosion while simultaneously storing carbon. Combined, this mitigates greenhouse gas emissions and filters stormwater, which improves water quality and reduces flooding. Flowering native plants offer the additional benefit of providing pollinating insects and birds with nectar and seeds, which in turn, support the natural production of the fruits and vegetables we grown in our gardens.



Redeveloping Brownfields to Address Environmental Injustice

One of the Park District's most impactful undertakings has been the conversion of contaminated properties, known as brownfields, into safe and healthy parks. To improve environmental conditions and provide more equitable access to healthy green spaces, we have focused most of our brownfield redevelopment efforts on the city's south and west sides in communities where past industrial development has left behind a legacy of contaminated land that now disproportionately impacts communities of color. These efforts have transformed vacant former industrial land into thriving parks and natural areas. Some notable Park District brownfield redevelopment projects include Park 596 (Park District headquarters) in the Brighton Park Community Area, which was previously home to several factories and processing plants, and La Villita Park in the South Lawn-dale Community Area, which was a former Superfund site.

Connecting People with Nature

Chicago's park system provides many opportunities to connect with nature. In addition to natural areas, our picnic groves, beaches, lawns and gardens provide access to a broad variety of green space for Chicagoans to enjoy. Formal floral gardens such as the Great Garden in Humboldt Park or the Japanese Garden in Jackson Park furnish rich displays of color and beauty. Harvest Gardens and edible Community Gardens provide Chicagoans with opportunities to grow food. Garfield Park and Lincoln Park Conservatories showcase plants from around the world, and offer the public 2.5 acres of gardens under glass to enjoy all year long. Spending time in any of our green spaces offers people a respite from the urban environment and provides proven health benefits. Research supports the notion that "spending as much time as possible in both natural settings and cultivated gardens can improve mood, reduce the negative effects of stress, encourage physical activity and other positive behaviors, improve cognition, reduce aggression, and enhance overall well-being in people of all ages under many different circumstances."¹



¹ McQuillan, S. (2019, September 14). Research shows how indoor and outdoor green spaces improve our well-being. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cravings/201909/11-ways-plants-enhance-your-mental-and-emotional-health>



Maintaining Healthy & Beautiful Landscapes

Through the year-round maintenance of natural areas and traditional park spaces, the Park District contributes to the citywide effort to upkeep aesthetic landscapes and promote a healthy natural environment. Our natural areas maintenance is guided by specific goals related to the establishment of native plants and the removal or control of invasive or weedy plants. Our turf grass lawn maintenance also takes an ecological approach by limiting pesticide use, keeping grass longer to discourage weed growth, and leaving grass clippings and fallen leaves in place – which adds nutrients back to the soil and reduces the need to dispose of these materials. Another important aspect of landscape maintenance is waste management, which is a major operation for the Park District. Cleaning crews and waste management trucks visit parks daily to pick up litter and empty waste receptacles. During the summer, Park District staff groom the city's public beaches daily, collecting and properly disposing of all kinds of garbage, which prevents it from ultimately ending up in Lake Michigan.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Park District's land holdings have grown continuously in recent years, increasing by 20% since the year 2000. Acquisitions of new parkland have generally been completed to meet one of two goals — ensuring all Chicago residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park, or strategically increasing our natural areas. Our natural areas acreage has more than quadrupled since 2000, and we've met our 10-minute walk goal for 98 percent of the city.



Protecting & Growing Our Tree Canopy

The Park District manages an extensive urban forest throughout our parks. We plant new trees every year to expand our tree canopy and replace trees that have died or been removed due to disease or damage. Forestry operations include maintenance pruning for tree health, but a significant amount of time and effort is spent addressing urgent situations related to storm damage or other emergencies. In order to more proactively manage the urban forest, we began expanding forestry operations in 2024 to increase our capacity for cyclical maintenance pruning. By 2026, we will increase our forestry operations by 50% over 2023 levels.



Section 3:

Promoting Environmental Stewardship through Education & Experiences

In 2024, more than 3,500 volunteers completed approximately

20,000 hours

of stewardship work at 415 work-days across 41 park natural areas

Through the Park District's citywide programs, specialized camps, artistic endeavors, and outdoor recreation opportunities, Chicagoans of all ages are developing deeper interest in and appreciation for the natural world. Our commitment to educating and inspiring people about nature is a cornerstone of the agency's identity, and we are proud of our broad and creative approaches to engaging people with nature in their city parks. In 2024, over 83,000 people took part in park nature programs and events.

Providing Hands-on Experiences in Nature

The Park District offers many different avenues for Chicagoans to get their hands dirty while improving and learning about the natural environment around them. The Community Stewardship Program, which has been a joint endeavor with The Nature Conservancy of Illinois for the past nine years, supports a cohort of volunteer stewards who lead workdays and other events that are open to the public at Park District natural areas across the city. In 2024, more than 3,500 volunteers completed approximately 20,000 hours of stewardship work at 415 workdays across 41 park natural areas! During a typical stewardship workday, volunteers pull weeds, remove trash, collect seeds or help to monitor plants. The Community Gardens in the Parks program provides city residents with opportunities to tend to their own plants with support, and resources from the Park District at over 90 gardens. Twenty-one parks host the Harvest Garden program, where children learn first-hand how to grow and harvest their own food in a three-season organic gardening program.



Creating Connections Through Recreation

As part of our efforts to promote health and wellness in the outdoors, the Park District operates unique "eco-recreational" amenities and has established nature play spaces in neighborhoods across the city. The Big Marsh Bike Park and the Steelworkers Park Climbing Wall exemplify eco-recreation by providing human-powered/non-motorized sporting activities in a reclaimed natural environment. The bike park is surrounded by native prairie habitat and sits adjacent to a large hemi-marsh. The climbing wall overlooks Lake Michigan and repurposes part of the massive ore walls that remained on site after the shuttered U.S. Steel South Works plant was demolished and the property became a park. Both the bike park and the climbing wall host groups of varying abilities and provide a recreational angle to nature engagement. The 16 nature play spaces the Park District has constructed — all reflective of local children's concepts and design ideas — are also active places, where youth can get creative in mud kitchens and build shelters out of sticks. Much less structured than a traditional playground, our nature play spaces encourage ingenuity, risk-taking, and problem-solving using natural materials in a natural context.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Park District repurposed a concession stand into a place for learning about the Chicago River. The RiverLab at River Park is an educational outpost on the North Branch where visitors can observe local aquatic species in fish tanks and play with a moveable stream table to better understand river flow dynamics. A variety of river-themed programs are offered, many of which involve getting out on the water, including ecology classes, summer science camps, botanizing-by-boat workshops, and introductory paddling experiences. In 2024, RiverLab established the "Thursday Night Paddle Club" to provide weekly opportunities for publicly accessible river recreation.





Providing Environmental Education Hubs

The Park District's three Nature Centers — the Ford Calumet Environmental Center at Big Marsh Park, Northerly Island Visitor Center and Park, and North Park Village Nature Center — all provide an array of opportunities for nature exploration and learning. Through our partnership with the nonprofit Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance, the Garfield Park Conservatory also serves as a hub for inclusive nature education and programming. These facilities share a common approach to providing in-depth, longer-term environmental programs. They host public school field trips and operate numerous nature-related camps and programs. For example, new in 2024 was the Plants and Pollinators Program, which brought elementary school students and their teachers from nearby public schools to Big Marsh Park for a series of field trips and workshops focused on the life cycle of native plants and the intersection with various pollinating insects.



Extending Learning into All Neighborhoods

Park District environmental education staff travel all over the city to deliver programs that introduce people to nature experiences in their local parks and natural areas. These programs communicate information about the natural environment through activities such as paddling, fishing, camping, stargazing, and guided nature walks. Their impact lies in their ability to reach people in neighborhoods where a nature center is not readily accessible. That reach is broadened even further by engaging youth in traditional day camps and afterschool programs all across Chicago through field trips to park natural areas.



Offering Diverse Engagement Opportunities

Understanding that there are many ways people find and nurture their relationships with nature, the Park District encourages creative pathways to support this journey. Art has been one such conduit, through endeavors such as the Climate Justice Teaching Artists program and nature-themed sculptures in our parks and natural areas. Another notable example that incorporates art and extends to include cultural connections to nature is the Burnham Wildlife Corridor Gathering Spaces. These spots for resting and convening within Burnham Park along Chicago's south lakefront include artistic elements, whose forms and images collectively convey cultural ties to the natural world from the Bronzeville, Pilsen and Chinatown communities. Two of these gathering spaces, *Set in Stone* and *La Ronda Parakata*, have been hosting annual celebrations of culture and nature since they were installed in 2016, and these events are now beloved neighborhood traditions.



Making Nature More Accessible

To truly make nature physically accessible to a broader range of people, the Park District is improving infrastructure in some of its largest and most popular natural areas. Paved trails now exist at Marian R. Byrnes Park, a large natural area on the Southeast Side, and Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary, the most popular birding spot in Illinois.² These smooth pathways allow visitors with wheelchairs, strollers, or walkers to navigate safely through these locations and experience nature firsthand. Additionally, an improved ADA-accessible boat launch is being constructed at River Park, which will significantly facilitate our adaptive paddling program at that location.

² Breen, J. (2017, January 30). Montrose Point Ranked Top Birding Spot In State. *DNAinfo*. <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20170130/uptown/montrose-point-top-birding-spot>



Sharing Knowledge & Information

The Park District uses its various media platforms to convey important and timely environmental information. During the summer beach season, our website provides water quality testing results for every public beach every day. Additionally, we utilize social media to highlight how various projects and initiatives are advancing sustainability and community resilience and how the general public can contribute to those efforts. We also share knowledge about nature in the city via interpretive signs in our natural areas that present images and information about the landscapes, plants, and wildlife present in a given location.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Park District's Harvest Garden Program was 25 years old in 2024! Due to high demand, it has expanded three-fold during this time – from 7 gardens in 1999 to 21 gardens in 2024. Harvest Garden provides summer and fall programming that allows kids the opportunity to grow healthy food from seed and learn the fundamentals of organic vegetable gardening, nutrition, cooking, and stewardship. Knowing that a plant-filled diet can have significant health benefits, the Park District deliberately expanded Harvest Garden on the South and West Sides (including in the Austin, South Shore, and West Englewood communities), where food deserts are known to exist.



Section 4:

Partnering to Increase Our Impact

Over \$20 million

in outside grant funds received in the past
decade to support nature-related projects

107

active research
projects in 2024

Our success in building a sustainable park system would not be possible without the robust partnerships we have built with organizations and agencies working to advance sustainability and resilience across the city. From other agencies and city departments to non-governmental and community-based groups, the collective dedication to improving the quality of life in Chicago and protecting our people and infrastructure from the threats posed by climate change is strong.



Expanding the Green Workforce

Park District employees are critical to ensuring that our properties are clean and safe and continue to thrive in our warming climate. Maintaining these spaces requires a robust workforce, which sometimes necessitates the additional services of various partners. In addition to professional contractors, the Park District partners with seasonal ecological restoration crews from local job training programs like Greencorps Chicago and the Student Conservation Association to work alongside our natural areas staff in the field. We are also working with The Nature Conservancy to staff full-time positions focused on community stewardship and natural areas development through a shared financing model.



Supporting Research

The Park District's diverse and extensive landscapes are living urban ecology laboratories that professional researchers and citizens alike are eager to investigate. We encourage and work to facilitate scientific research projects throughout our parks. Research findings help us to improve our day-to-day operations as well further longer-term, academic inquiries. We support these efforts through permitting, coordination, and direct participation.

Advancing Our Goals Through Collaboration

The Park District regularly works with other organizations and agencies across the city to advance our goals related to environmental sustainability and resilience. Staff participate in a variety of consortiums that promote information exchange and educational opportunities, such as the Chicago Wilderness Alliance. We also have strong working relationships with partner institutions that help deepen our impact and offer insightful perspectives on issues and situations we are collectively addressing. For example, the Park District is currently working with colleagues from Adler Planetarium, the Field Museum, Shedd Aquarium, and others to expand native habitat on the Museum Campus.





Coordinating with Citywide Initiatives

The Park District's green initiatives and goals for long-term environmental resiliency directly support a number of citywide initiatives and plans. Chicago's 2022 Climate Action Plan sets an ambitious goal of reducing the city's carbon emissions 62% by 2040, and the Park District is contributing to this effort by implementing energy saving measures and evaluating options for diesel fuel alternatives. The City's Sustainable Development Policy, which encourages design elements that increase

energy efficiency, decrease greenhouse gas emissions, improve public health, manage stormwater, promote more efficient transportation, divert waste, promote workforce development, and protect wildlife, guides our construction practices. Additionally, the Park District participates in citywide initiatives focused on natural assets, such as the River Ecology & Governance Task Force and the Our Roots Chicago's Tree Ambassador Program.



DID YOU KNOW?

In 2024, there were 107 active research projects taking place in our natural areas and parks across the city. Research topics span a wide variety of issues, ranging from diseases in small mammal populations to the effects of brush pile burns on soil and plant communities. The Park District is an active partner in many of these projects. For example, we are currently working in partnership with Chicago Botanic Garden and the University of Michigan-Flint to evaluate the ecosystem benefits, such as stormwater infiltration and carbon storage, that are provided by park spaces, lawns, natural areas, and short-statured native lawn alternatives. This collaborative project was recently awarded a \$1.76 million grant from the National Science Foundation Partnership to Advance Conservation Science & Practice Program.



Conclusion

The Park District has made great progress in contributing to environmental sustainability and resilience across the city. Our work is generating meaningful environmental benefits and supporting communities. We are taking steps to reduce our carbon footprint, conserve natural resources, provide for wildlife, and enhance the functioning of the natural systems upon which we rely. Those actions are not undertaken in isolation but, rather, with an eye towards how they intersect with improving Chicagoans' quality of life. Through the equitable development of parks and delivery of nature-related programming, the Park District

is addressing environmental injustices and providing opportunities and knowledge that can strengthen people's ties to the natural world around them. Such connections benefit mental and physical health and empower people to think and live more sustainably. Additionally, we are improving environmental conditions in the city in ways that protect people's health and homes — whether that be through the establishment of native habitat, which can absorb and filter stormwater, or the planting of trees, which can capture carbon and reduce ambient temperatures.

Next Steps

We are proud of our work to date, but we know there are many opportunities to improve and expand our efforts. Looking ahead, we will develop a Sustainability and Resiliency Plan that identifies areas where we can continue to improve our operations, articulate our goals, and set metrics to measure our progress. This plan will help guide future investments of time and resources as we continue in our work to make Chicago a greener city.



Image Captions & Information

COVER:

Front: Ping Tom Park Natural Area (Armour Square Community Area).

Back: Chicago skyline view from the Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary (Uptown Community Area).

PAGES 1 & 2:

Left page: View of the Chicago River's South Branch and city skyline from Canal Origins Park (Lower West Side Community Area).

Right page: Visitors enjoying fall colors at Burnham Nature Sanctuary (Kenwood Community Area).

PAGE 4:

Day campers visit Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary (Uptown Community Area) on a nature field trip.

PAGE 5:

"Drift Away," created by James "Casper" Jankowiak as part of the Flight of Butterflies series, at Chicago Park District Headquarters (Brighton Park Community Area).

PAGE 7:

Lakefront refuse truck powered by clean-burning biodiesel.

PAGE 8:

Left: An electrician upgrades outdoor park lighting to LED bulbs.

Middle: Plumbers install a new water efficient drinking fountain.

Right: Play fields with LED lighting at La Villita Park (South Lawndale Community Area).

PAGE 9:

Left: Park District technicians replace lead-based water lines at Ken-Well Park (Hermosa Community Area). **Right:** Carpenters re-use lumber to build a walkway at a Park District Harbor.

PAGE 10:

Left: An overhead aerial shot of Soldier Field & the Museum Campus (Near South Community Area). **Middle:** Beaches being groomed by biodiesel powered machinery. **Right:** Park District Superintendent and CEO, Rosa Escareño, and park patrons celebrating the new permeable trail at Jesse Owens Park (Calumet Heights Community Area).

PAGE 11:

The natural areas crew conducts a prescribed burn to suppress invasive plants and encourage native species at Big Marsh Park (South Deering Community Area).

PAGE 12:

Left: Water flowing freely through the area where a dam was removed on the Chicago River, part of a major ecological restoration project at River Park (Albany Park Community Area). **Right:** Great Lakes piping plovers, Imani and his chick, looking for food on Montrose Beach (Uptown Community Area), photo by Tamima Itani.

PAGE 13:

Left: Marram grass, planted to help keep sand in place and create native dune habitat, at Foster Beach (Edgewater Community Area).

Middle: A young patron plays on the new Nature Play Area at Park 596 Brighton Community Campus (Brighton Park Community Area).

Right: A young patron enjoys the Garfield Park Conservatory (Garfield Park Community Area).

PAGE 14:

Left: Colorful flowers in front of the Adler Planetarium.

Middle: View of the skyline from Burnham Park (Douglas Community Area). **Right:** Forestry staff prune branches to improve tree health.

PAGE 15:

A young visitor learns about dune landscapes at Montrose Beach Dunes (Uptown Community Area).

PAGE 16:

Left: Volunteers prune trees at Washington Park (Washington Park Community Area). **Middle:** Climbing event with community partners at Steelworkers Park (South Chicago Community Area). **Right:** Family paddling event on the Chicago River near River Park (Albany Park Community Area).

PAGE 17:

Left: A celebratory Plants and Pollinators Program event at Big Marsh Park (South Deering Community Area).

Middle: Day camper displays their catch at the Jetty on the Riverwalk. **Right:** The Mid-Autumn Festival at the Set in Stone gathering space in the Burnham Wildlife Corridor (Douglas Community Area).

PAGE 18:

Upper left: A visitor utilizes the paved path at Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary and scatters native plant seeds as part of an event.

Lower left: Park staff stand with U.S. Forest Service staff by an interpretive sign explaining the benefits of trees at Marian R. Byrnes Park (South Deering Community Area). **Right:** Day campers keep plants hydrated on a Harvest Garden field trip at Skinner Park's Community Roots Demonstration Garden (Near West Side Community Area).

PAGE 19:

Staff from the University of Illinois-Chicago collect a water sample from Ohio Street Beach for same-day water quality testing (Near North Community Area)

PAGE 20:

Left: Restoration crew members with the Student Conservation Association and the Park District's Natural Areas Program work together to install wetland plants at Hegewisch Marsh Park (Hegewisch Community Area). **Middle:** Volunteers monitor purple martins at Montrose Harbor (Uptown Community Area)

Right: Researchers conduct field work for a native lawn alternatives study taking place in Chicago parks and at the Chicago Botanic Garden (photo taken at Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, IL).

PAGE 21:

Left: The Ford Calumet Environmental Center at Big Marsh Park (South Deering Community Area), a LEED Silver accredited structure that aligns with the City of Chicago's Sustainable Development Policy's goal of protecting wildlife, which includes fritted glass, minimal exterior lighting, and canopy structures over large areas of glass to prevent landscape reflections to minimize negative impacts on birds. **Right:** The room poses for a photo at the 2024 Community Science Research Summit.

PAGE 22:

Community-based partners lead a *Día de los Muertos* event at *La Ronda Parakata* gathering space in the Burnham Wildlife Corridor (Douglas Community Area).

PAGE 23:

Upper left: People find relief from the summer heat under a tree by the McKinley Park lagoon (McKinley Park Community Area).

Upper right: Children meet a frog at Calumet Park (East Side Community Area).

Lower: Local students enjoy a pop-up nature play space.

PAGES 25 & 26:

Left page: Marquette Park Natural Area (Chicago Lawn Community Area).

Right page: People carrying lanterns over the moon bridge at Jackson Park's Japanese Garden (Woodlawn Community Area).







February 2025

City of Chicago, Brandon Johnson, Mayor | Chicago Park District Board
of Commissioners | Rosa Escareño, General Superintendent & CEO

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