Our Great Rivers - request for proposals in community-based practices

RFP release: February 1, 2017
Proposal deadline: May 31, 2017
Funding decision: September 26, 2017

Background

In 2014, The Chicago Community Trust met with rivers advocates to think through long-term approaches to restoring ecological integrity to the system. Out of those conversations came the recognition that healthy rivers are inextricably linked to community ownership.

Re-introducing residents to their rivers through community and economic development, particularly in parts of the city in need of quality natural amenities, would unlock pent-up demand for the system. Access would then lead to regular interaction, surfacing new ideas about the rivers from both the market and the community. Over time new uses would depend on a system that is environmentally sound.

Fortunately, new ways to engage this former industrial workhorse had already begun. Ping Tom Park, the Chicago Riverwalk and the boathouses are a clear demonstration of urban rivers as a post-industrial asset. But expanding that prosperity throughout the system to three very different rivers in different parts of the city with different uses, demographics, histories and needs would require strategic, coordinated thinking. Thus, the City of Chicago was eager to bring broad-based, community-focused leadership to the idea of a system-wide vision.

In early 2015, the Trust and partners Joyce Foundation and ArcelorMittal would work with the City to select Metropolitan Planning Council as the principal administrator of a visioning process for the Chicago, Calumet and Des Plaines rivers and tributaries. Friends of the Chicago River and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning would bring added capacity to the project. Over the course of 15 months and nearly 100 public events, the partners would synthesize the thoughts and ideas of more than 6,000 people into consensus parameters to guide the more prescriptive work of achieving the Our Great Rivers Vision.

Last August, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Trust President and CEO Terry Mazany and other civic, government and community leaders, publicly launched the Our Great Rivers Vision, marking the start of a new era of bold thinking and restored hope for Chicago’s river system and 150 miles of land that abuts it.

After the public launch, the Trust created the Our Great Rivers Fund as a lasting vehicle to coordinate support from those whose vision for the rivers is as bold as the 6,000 Chicagoans who created Our Great Rivers.

The Chicago Community Trust is soliciting grant proposals to begin implementation.
Trust Support for the Our Great Rivers Vision

The Chicago Community Trust supports ideas that hold promise for exponential impact. A healthy, dynamic, and high-functioning river system in Chicago is one of these ideas—a catalyst for place-based sustainable development but with a large geographic reach. Our Great Rivers is decidedly a vision—it is not a plan. Its overarching job is to remind us of the asset hidden in our midst and awaken our latent desire to nurture it. It has the potential to elevate a massively underleveraged asset to a level on par with the award-winning 606, booming Fulton Market and our prized lakefront.

As the Trust moves in a bold new direction with a strategic plan that calls for an economy defined by equity and sustainable communities across the region, it is essential to have vehicles to deliver these ideals. Our Great Rivers helps communities, government, policy leaders, developers and philanthropy reclaim the river system as a connector of people, neighborhoods, commerce and natural habitats.

Problem Statement

Achieving the Our Great Rivers Vision will take decades and likely cost billions. A unified vision for the entirety of the system sets helpful parameters for context-sensitive investments in the neighborhoods. Still, realizing the vision’s themes of “inviting, productive and living” in the rivers themselves and along more than 150 miles of river-adjacent land is a daunting proposition. Parts of the system that could be accessible to residents are not. We have yet to institutionalize creative approaches to integrating important industrial landscapes with nature and people. Forward-thinking commercial and manufacturing uses along the system are not commonplace. Habitat restoration is fragmented. Activating the system through recreation or cultural enhancements is nascent. Pollution remains ubiquitous. Taken together, these challenges translate into a negative perception of the system overall. In summary: Our great rivers fall short of their potential.

Outcomes Sought

The Chicago Community Trust calls for community-led proposals across four of the Trust’s funding arenas: sustainable development, economic development, public health, and arts and culture. River-adjacent neighborhoods throughout the system are invited to apply through representative organizations for funding to administer rivers-related planning, programs and projects. All proposals must align with one or more of the Our Great Rivers vision’s three themes:

Inviting Rivers

Enhancements to infrastructure, information and programming will make our rivers more intuitive, meaningful and exciting places to be, drawing more people for recreation, work and relaxation.

Improved cleanliness, safety and neighborhood linkages will lay the groundwork for creating more welcoming rivers and riverfronts. Better wayfinding and interpretative signage will convey the breadth of the rivers’ role in shaping Chicago’s past and future, while making the system easy to navigate. City, neighborhood and civic leaders will collaborate to design new access points, amenities, entertainment and activities for residents and tourists of all ages and abilities.

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1 Our Great Rivers: A vision for the Chicago Calumet and Des Plaines rivers; published August 2016; Chicago.
**Productive Rivers**

They have historically been and will continue to be working rivers that are transportation arteries, commercial corridors and tourism generators.

Where economic activity is the best use of riverfront land, we will work to retain existing businesses that rely on the water and attract new types of entrepreneurs and jobs, while preserving the integrity of the water and the culture of surrounding communities. We will enhance our rivers’ transportation infrastructure to accommodate barges, tour boats, water taxis and recreational watercraft. Together, business, community, government and civic leaders will create innovative riverfront development that harmonizes the needs of people, businesses and nature.

**Living Rivers**

From riverbeds to shorelines, plants, animals and people will co-exist in vibrant, healthy ecosystems.

Water quality management policies will proactively reduce pollution, restore the environment, create more habitats for fish and wildlife, and aggressively combat the spread of invasive species. Future riverfront development of all kinds will incorporate planned space for all forms of life, connecting people to nature.

**Proposal Process**

**Eligibility**

Prior to submitting a proposal, please ensure your organization’s eligibility for this award by reviewing these requirements:

- Nonprofit organizations with evidence of tax-exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code or those using a 501(c)(3) fiscal agent.
- Local government entities.
- Organizations located within and/or primarily serving residents of Cook County.
- Organizations with a commitment to diversity and inclusion for their governance, staffing, and populations served; and explicit adherence to non-discriminatory practices in the hiring of staff or in providing services on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, national origin or disability.

**Diversity & Inclusion**

The Trust requires all applicants to either adopt the Trust's Diversity Statement or have a similar policy adopted by their boards. The Trust believes that the diversity of our community is a fundamental strength of our region. Our mission to improve the quality of life for the residents of our region is best fulfilled when we embrace diversity as a value and a practice. We define diversity to include, but not limited to, age, disability status, economic circumstance, ethnicity, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation.
Additionally, the Trust asks that applicants provide demographic data on board and staff as well as clients/beneficiaries of the projects. The Trust believes that the board and staff composition of grantees should reflect the diversity and demographics of the clients/community being served, and include diversity among its leadership at the board and senior staff levels to ensure the diverse perspectives needed at the decision-making levels. For this reason, the Trust does take into consideration the demographic make-up of the board, staff and clients of a grant applicant as an important proposal evaluation criterion.

Submission, Review, and Selection

Applicants must complete their proposal via GrantCentral, the Trust’s online grants management system. To access an application, grant seekers must log into GrantCentral at [https://cct.smartsimple.com](https://cct.smartsimple.com). Organization profiles must be reviewed and, if needed, updated prior to application submissions. Proposals are due by midnight on May 31, 2017. Late or incomplete proposals will not be considered. Applicants may receive a site visit, telephone call or other communication from Trust staff as part of the proposal review process. Grant proposals will be evaluated using multiple criteria, including the following:

Proposal
- Ability to demonstrate alignment with the Our Great Rivers Vision.
- Ability to demonstrate alignment with relevant neighborhood and citywide plans.
- Ability to propose solutions that integrate two or more Trust funding arenas, including sustainable development, economic development, public health and arts and culture.
- Ability to complement and leverage existing or promised investments in and along the rivers.
- Clarity of project description.
- Alignment of project activities to achieve goals and outcomes.
- Achievability of the time table as it corresponds to project activities.
- Ability to engage, respond to, and address the needs and vision of the community, including residents and communities of color.
- Likelihood of success, scale, replication, and sustained commitment.
- Ability to apply innovative approaches in community development, market-based solutions, or project execution generally.

Organization
- Organizational capacity to implement the project, including leadership, staffing, business operations and fiscal management.
- Ability to leverage financial, human and technical resources leading to greater impact.
- Ability to collaborate and bring public and private partners together with nonprofit organizations.
- Ability to collaborate with stakeholders in and across neighborhoods and communities.
- Demonstration of leadership representative of the community, including minority populations.

Amounts Available

The Chicago Community Trust will make up to 15 grants under this RFP. Grant amounts will range from $25,000 to $100,000, with the possibility for renewal. Grant recipients will be expected to meet the Trust's requirements for the submission of financial and narrative reports at the end of the annual grant cycle, including a final report.
An information session about this RFP will take place at the Ideas to Action: Turning Your Stretch of the River into a Neighborhood Destination workshop on Thursday, Feb. 16, 2017, from 9 a.m. to noon, at the Chicago Maritime Museum, 1200 W. 35th Street, Chicago.

Impact, Evaluation and Learning

Evaluation of the Our Great Rivers projects will occur at two levels: 1) programmaticaly, which measures the activities of the project over the course of the one-year grant cycle, and: 2) systemically, which measures the long-term impacts of the project using defensible metrics and indicators.

An external firm may be commissioned to evaluate the Trust’s investments in Our Great Rivers, and this firm will track the systemic measures. Grant recipients may be expected to make their project processes and results available to the evaluators.

The Chicago Community Trust will convene a learning cohort of rivers stakeholders, including Our Great Rivers grantees, to meet regularly for status updates and to share information, ideas and best practices.

Contact

For technical questions about GrantCentral and the proposal submission process please contact Nestor Avendano, Grants Coordinator, at navendano@cct.org. For questions about proposal content please contact Michael Davidson, Senior Program Officer, at mdavidson@cct.org.