

Chicago Wilderness

A regional alliance dedicated to
protecting nature and enriching life

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For more information, contact:

Lucy Hutcherson, Chicago Wilderness
Director of Conservation & Communication Programs
Mobile 630-234-3906
lucy.hutcherson@chicagowilderness.org

McHenry County Strategic Plan Gains State-wide Recognition

Chicago Wilderness-supported project showcases green infrastructure's environmental and community benefits

Before the grass is planted and the concrete poured; before the sewer lines are laid and the first hole is dug; before the first dollars are spent, planners are hard at work, dreaming about what could be. Often, their visions are of the kinds of communities in which people want to live, that are economically prosperous and environmentally sound.

The Illinois chapter of the American Planning Association recognizes the importance of that kind of comprehensive vision. This year, they will recognize the best in Illinois planning in seven categories at their award luncheon on September 20 in Champaign.

Among this year's winners is McHenry County. Their Green Infrastructure Plan will be recognized as the 2012 Best Strategic Plan. Adopted by the County's Board in July 2012, the McHenry County Green Infrastructure Plan was a collaboration between the planners at the County and the collaborative Sustainable Watershed Action Team of Chicago Wilderness. The effort was generously supported by a grant from the Grand Victoria Foundation to Chicago Wilderness.

“The plan is about protecting nature for the benefit of people, to promote economic vitality, and to preserve the culture and quality of life of residents living at the northern edge of a growing metropolitan region. Our partners in McHenry County deserve this important recognition,” said Melinda Pruett-Jones, Executive Director at Chicago Wilderness. “This is the first county in Illinois to adopt a county-wide green infrastructure planning process and Chicago Wilderness is proud to have been a part of it.”

The plan incorporates green infrastructure concepts that value the benefits of open space, functioning waterways, and accessible nature for community residents as much as it values well-

planned roadways, sewer systems, and business districts when making land use decisions in new developments. This county-wide planning approach creates opportunities to establish a network of open space and waterways that runs through every jurisdiction in the county.

“At its heart, green infrastructure uses nature, whenever possible, and human ingenuity to mimic nature, which enhances a community’s environmental quality,” said Dennis Dreher, Senior Consultant for Geosyntec Consultants, a national environmental and water resources consulting firm with local offices in Oak Brook and Chicago. “By incorporating green infrastructure into McHenry County’s systems, they will improve water quality, reduce flood damage and provide additional recreational opportunities for residents. It truly is a win-win-win system.” Dreher, representing Chicago Wilderness, partnered with McHenry County’s Senior Planner Dennis Sandquist to produce the award winning plan.

McHenry County began the planning process in December 2010, assisted by Dreher and the Chicago Wilderness Sustainable Watershed Action Team (SWAT). “SWAT is an innovative partnership that delivers green infrastructure planning and customized technical assistance to help communities develop local plans and implement sustainable development practices,” said Nancy Williamson, Regional Watershed Coordinator for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and Coordinator for the collaborative planning efforts of SWAT. “SWAT’s direct, hands-on planning assistance and resource mapping techniques are essential for greening the infrastructure that ensures long-term health and sustainability of communities throughout the region.”

With SWAT, McHenry County used sophisticated geospatial data and hundreds of layers of resource information to create a comprehensive map of the county’s remaining natural landscape and its functions.

“While this plan was developed for McHenry County, its strength comes from the many groups who played an active role in its creation,” said Dreher. “And now that it has been approved by the County board, local government agencies, private land owners, and residents throughout the county will have to work together to get it implemented.”

A range of green infrastructure planning tools are available to communities through Chicago Wilderness, at www.chicagowilderness.org. Read more about McHenry County’s Green Infrastructure Plan at: www.co.mchenry.il.us

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Chicago Wilderness is a regional alliance that connects people and nature. We are more than 260 organizations that work together to restore local nature and improve the quality of life for all who live here, by protecting the lands and waters on which we all depend. Read more at: chicagowilderness.org