

***Urbs in Solitudinem*¹**

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WHEN THE CITY OF CHICAGO WAS FOUNDED IN THE 1830s, boosterism most likely overshadowed the irony of the city's motto in relation to the city's moniker.² Nevertheless, the "City in a Garden" has been home to rather progressive and unconventional approaches to parks and wilderness for well over 100 years. Challenges and opportunities for developing area parks arose out of several driving factors, including social welfare, political division, a critical mass of leading planners and architects, and eventually a growing conservation movement. These factors would help to establish a unique form of government entity for park space and a hybrid organization protecting wilderness that transcends political boundaries in favor of ecological ones. Later, the National Park Service entered the region with new types of parks that are still under development. This is why Chicago does not have one overarching regional park system. Instead, park space is managed by hundreds of park districts, many county forest preserve districts, several varieties of federal parks, and the regional alliance Chicago Wilderness.

The first resemblances of organized parks began as early as 1869, a little over thirty years after the city incorporated. The City of Chicago saw enormous growth in the mid-19th century as a business and trading hub thanks to the opening of the Illinois & Michigan Canal in 1848, the Chicago Board of Trade in 1850, and the growth of the railroads soon after. Industry and manufacturing brought jobs and therefore attracted migrants and immigrants. These people sought respite from cramped living spaces and unhealthy working conditions by retreating to the lakefront for cooler winds, open space, and relaxation. But soon, neighborhoods developed too far from Lake Michigan's shores for convenient leisure. With the need to organize more open space, the Illinois Legislature created three park districts for the city: South Parks District, West Parks District, and Lincoln Park District.³

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For many, even today, Chicago's lakefront is an iconic symbol of the city. It is considered the city's front yard and is a beautiful stretch of parks, recreational opportunities, and alternative transportation corridors. A part of it got its start as a cemetery, an alternative open space providing a respite for residents to flock to. But concerns about drinking water contamination lead to reinterment of the graves. And with that the space became the responsibility of the Lincoln Park District. Further south the rest of the lakefront was the responsibility of the South Parks District. This part of the city's open space has a long and well documented history, including many legal battles to protect the lakefront, major environmental changes as debris from the Chicago Fire and the digging of the Sanitary and Ship Canal filled in shoreline, and current struggles to continue keeping the lakefront "forever open, clear, and free."⁴

But the city also has an extensive backyard. It consists of a series of parks and preserves that ring the city and provide additional space for the people of the region to enjoy the outdoors. The rest of these areas for open space fell to the other two park districts. Downtown's Grant Park and the Jackson and Washington parks became the responsibility of the South Parks District (Jackson would eventually become the site of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and the future home for the Barack Obama Presidential Center). Lastly, the West Parks District was to provide the parks and boulevards to complete a ring of parks around the city and meet the needs of a city expanding out away from the lake. Designed by renowned landscape architect William Le Baron Jenney, Douglas, Garfield, and Humboldt parks became the foundation for that first ring of open space. Rapid growth in the region came on so intensely that development and improvements became the responsibility of one civic board after another. Some would eventually merge, but as we shall see, a greatly splintered collection of government entities made regional consolidation difficult.

Taxing districts were, and still are in Illinois, a means for generating revenue for specific needs, whether for parks, schools, or fire protection. In the case of parks for Chicago, these three districts were formed and governed by commissioners appointed by the state. Typically they were prominent men from the city who either wanted to perform their civic duty or who were cashing in political favors. In any event, the Great Fire of 1871 and the financial panic of 1873 delayed the development of any parks. But just like how the city quickly rebuilt, parks in the Chicago region began to take shape while new districts formed in communities annexed by the city. The growth of Chicago in the late 19th century was due to both a continuous influx of new residents and annexations of neighboring communities. In 1889, the city annexed 125 square miles through referendums.⁵ Communities voted to join Chicago in order to take advantage of the economy of scale for services. And as this held true for services such as sewer and water, parks were still controlled by a collection of different districts.

In fact, by 1911 there were ten different park districts in the city. This led the Chicago Bureau of Public Efficiency to publish a report on park management, stating that "[f]rom the viewpoint of the community as a whole, however, there is not only much waste and inefficiency in connection with expenditures of park funds, but the needs of the people for park facilities are not properly met, nor can they be, so long as the present lack of unified management continues."⁶ During this time, the need for recreational space and playgrounds for families and children grew as part of a larger Progressive movement supported by settlement



Figure 1. Chicago's lakefront has long been considered its front yard and is where many people go to play. The original shoreline is actually very near the line of buildings along Michigan Avenue (Flickr/Michael Muraz).

houses such as Hull House. The resources needed for these capital projects could only come from the big three park districts, which were able to petition for legislation to raise funds. These three—and in particular, the South Park District—accomplished this. And so Daniel Burnham, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Calvert Vaux were hired to create these new types of spaces.⁷

But the other districts would also start to clamor for the ability to raise funds through tax levies. Despite the recommendations of the Chicago Bureau for Public Efficiency, as the city grew so did the number of park districts. Voters, wanting resources in their neighborhoods, voted to give these districts the power to tax as well. Within 20 years the number of districts more than doubled. It would take the Depression for communities to finally heed the advice to unify management under one agency to save money. So in 1934 the Chicago Park District was formed.⁸

At the turn of the 20th century, the need for open space beyond the city's borders was of great concern to the city and the Progressive civic leaders interested in the importance of parks and nature for the health of the community. The famed photojournalist Jacob Riis and Chicago reformer Jane Addams met with the Municipal Science Club in 1898 to discuss the need for more open space for the cramped Chicagoans living farther and farther from the lake.⁹ The result was the establishment of the Special Park Commission.

This commission was made up of elected city officials, architects, and representatives of the West, South, and Lincoln park districts. Influenced by the progressive ideas of healthy outdoor play to ease the hardships of the poor living in squalid conditions, the commission had a three-pronged approach to improving parks in Chicago. First, it supported the South, West, and Lincoln park districts by assisting with improvements and proposing legislation to fund all three. After that, its biggest charge was supporting the creation of smaller neighborhood parks and playgrounds as part of the Playground Movement. These parks were to fill in the gaps within the city between the major parks of the three main park districts. Lastly, the commission looked ahead to the future growth of the city and where more parkland should be preserved.

Figure 2. The North Pond in Lincoln Park demonstrates how park planning one hundred and fifty years ago provides opportunities for wilderness to continue in the city today (Flickr/Wildcat Dunny).



Five years after its formation, the Special Park Commission published the *Report of the Special Park Commission to the City Council of Chicago on the Subject of a Metropolitan Park System*. In it, the commission argued for extensive improvements to the city's park infrastructure. Citing reports such as *City Homes Association on Tenement Conditions*, they made the case that more open space could help lower mortality, juvenile delinquency, and the incidence of infectious diseases.¹⁰ But the biggest recommendation was establishing another ring of parks around the city. Leading this charge were Dwight Heald Perkins and Jens Jensen. Perkins was an architect who started his own firm in Chicago in 1894 after working for the firm of Burnham and Root. He is better known for being the architect for the Chicago Public School System, nevertheless he was a strong proponent of the benefits of open space. Jensen moved to the United States from Denmark in 1884 and eventually found work with the West Park Commission. He experimented with using native flowers in his landscape designs and soon rose to become head of the commission. He is considered one of the fathers of American landscape architecture and along with his work to create forest preserves, he was an advocate for the establishment of the Indiana Dunes, just southeast of the city, as a national park.

Buoyed by Perkins and Jensen, the major portion of the report was based on the far-sighted belief that Chicago's borders would continue to extend farther and farther from Lake Michigan. Using formulas based on population growth of cities, the commission estimated that Chicago would encompass all of Cook County by the middle of the century, with a population of 10 million people.¹¹ With the region separated into four zones by the authors, zone four reached the farthest out from the central business area. Based on these zones, Perkins and Jensen made the case for a series of parks, or preserves as they were calling them, in the natural beauty of places such as Skokie Marsh, the Des Plaines River Valley, and Palos Hills. Out there lands were not completely adulterated by the farm plow or urban development. The commission believed that acquiring this land now would be cheaper than trying to bid for it with developers later on.

For this next layer of parks arcing around the city, the commission recommended that "[t]he whole matter of a harmonious plan for an outer system, including details as to localities within and, if deemed advisable, outside of Cook County, is recommended for reference to the Outer Belt Park Commission."¹² The reason for referring to the Outer Belt Park Commission is because the Special Park Commission and the City of Chicago had no jurisdiction that far west, north, and south. The Special Park Commission believed that the city would eventually expand out that way and hoped that city and county government would merge. When Cook County established the Outer Belt Park Commission in 1903, its mission was to acquire preserves around the outside of Chicago. Perkins and Jensen thought this group would eventually become another city park commission once Chicago expanded out that far. It too had representatives from the city, including Mayor Carter Harrison, Burnham, and Perkins.

Nevertheless, Jensen's "Report of the Landscape Architect" portion took up nearly half of the report. He highlighted the flora, fauna, and topography of several significant areas he believed should be preserved, including Lake Calumet to the south, the Des Plaines River Valley to the west, and what would become the Skokie Lagoons to the north. Jensen started his section explicitly stating, "One of the purposes for which forest parks should be acquired

is to preserve for present and future generations lands of natural scenic beauty situated within easy reach of multitudes that have access to no other grounds for recreation or summer outings. A second purpose is to preserve spots having relation to the early settlements of Chicago and which are therefore of historical significance, and still another is to preserve the flora in its primeval state for the sake of the beauty of the forest and for the benefit of those desiring knowledge of plants indigenous there.”¹³

The work of the Special Park Commission did not go unnoticed. Five years after their report on a metropolitan park system, Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett created the *Plan of Chicago*. Published under the support of the Commercial Club of Chicago in 1909, it was a major, comprehensive proposal for the future development of not only the City of Chicago, but the surrounding region as well. With civic improvements and urban planning really growing in this timeframe, Burnham’s idea of “making no little plans” became a model for future city plans. In the *Plan of Chicago* he incorporated much of the work of Perkins and Jensen into the park portions. Burnham, known for his work with the firm of Olmsted & Vaux for the South Parks Commission and even more so for planning and running the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, brought a greater level of legitimacy to Jensen’s recommendations.

This could not have come at a better time for Cook County and the Outer Belt Park Commission. The grand vision of a combined, county-wide park district was now fraught

Figure 3. Perkins and Jensen envisioned an abundance of open, natural space where residents could go to fish, camp, and row. Today, the Cook County Forest Preserves offer these opportunities in many locations. Busse Woods near Elk Grove Village borders an interstate highway and is less than five miles from O’Hare International Airport (Cook County Forest Preserve).



with obstacles. For starters, the City of Chicago's ability to expand geographically was losing momentum. Whereas in 1889 communities such as Hyde Park and Lake View voted to be annexed by the city, the turn of the 20th century saw referendums by communities such as Blue Island, Evanston, and Oak Park refuse to give up their sovereignty. One of the results of this rejection was that the Outer Belt Park Commission and the various park districts in the city would not be forming one county-wide park district. But this was not the end of the concept of a regional park system. The Outer Belt Park Commission and the Cook County Board still believed strongly in providing space for people and communities to flock to and temporarily escape from urban areas. Following the recommendations from Perkins, Jensen, and the Special Park Commission, they believed that natural parks, as opposed to designed and landscaped parks, would be a huge benefit to the region. So rather than following the model of the South Parks Commission, these commissioners wanted places for people to hike, fish, and camp, all in locations that were much easier to access for the masses than the growing roster of national parks and monuments in the American West.

Several attempts were made to establish legislation to create these "Outer Belt Parks," or "Forest Preserves," which they were starting to be called. The latter term became popular as people worried about yet another park district competing for land and tax dollars.¹⁴ Legal and constitutional challenges thwarted the first two attempts, but in 1914 the Forest Preserve Act was passed, establishing the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, and a year later the Downstate Forest Preserve Act provided for additional districts in other parts of the state. Having passed the legal hurdles, in 1916 the district immediately put forth to voters

a referendum to sell \$1 million dollars' worth of bonds to acquire land based on the recommendations from Perkins and Jensen. The measure passed and before the year was out the district was acquiring land.¹⁵ Civic leaders and residents in neighboring counties also became concerned about the loss of open space as development grew and authorized forest preserve districts in their counties as well: in DuPage County in 1915, Kane County in 1925, Will County in 1927, and Lake County in 1958.

With a growing understanding and respect for nature expanding beyond the



Figure 4. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County manages over sixty thousand acres of land where people can get into nature but still be in the city (Forest Preserves of Cook County).

vast open spaces of national parks or public lands out West, organizations and individuals looked to save and highlight urban pockets of nature. Following in the footsteps of boards and commissions of the early 20th century, civic-minded individuals and government agencies around Chicago wanted to preserve and educate the public about nature in the city and surrounding area. The growth of the environmental movement and a better understanding of the science of ecology encouraged more active preservation and restoration of natural lands. But modeling on those past commissions would not work. In the late 20th century there was little room and little stomach for yet more layers of taxing districts or appointed commissions.

Cook County alone has 102 park districts and one forest preserve district. Expanding to the collar counties of DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will adds an additional five county-wide districts and 79 park districts.¹⁶ On top of that there is the National Park Service and United States Forest Service managing park lands in the region. This includes the National Park Service's Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Area (a first of its kind coalition overseen by the federal government), and the newly created Pullman National Monument. To the southwest of the city the Forest Service manages Midewin, a converted military arms plant that is being restored to 19,000 acres of tallgrass prairie. As can be imagined, consolidation was not a realistic solution to ensure regional harmony. Cooperation seemed a much more realistic goal.

In 1996, a group of individuals representing 34 different agencies met to help define urban wilderness and develop a comprehensive plan to preserve, restore, and educate about nature. It was still to be found in pockets great and small throughout the area. To save and improve upon these places of nature, scientists understood something important that politicians failed to realize: that ecosystems know no political boundaries. Hundreds of park districts could not individually make a big impact on improving the biodiversity and natural landscape of the Chicago region, but a coalition of them could. So a loose alliance called Chicago Wilderness was formed. Its purpose: "to sustain, restore, and expand our remnant natural communities."¹⁷

The foundation for Chicago Wilderness is the Chicago Region Biodiversity Council—the leadership of the major conservation groups in the area. They met to set the goals for Chicago Wilderness. The premiere issue of the organization's magazine was published a year later. It set out to define what Chicago Wilderness was, stating, "first and foremost, Chicago Wilderness is an archipelago of 200,000 acres of protected natural lands stretching from Chiwaukee Prairie in Wisconsin, through the six counties of northeastern Illinois and Goose Lake Prairie southwest of Joliet, to the dunes of northwestern Indiana."

In the introduction by the editor, one can already tell that this group transcended political boundaries in favor of ecological ones. The introductory piece went on to further describe Chicago Wilderness as "54 partners forming a collaboration of individuals and institutions committed to saving our rich natural heritage and helping to infuse knowledge of our native landscape into the cultural identity of the region."¹⁸ In a span of one year, the number of members grew, and Chicago Wilderness quickly established areas of main focus.

In its early years, Chicago Wilderness received support from many federal agencies, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Funds helped the organization grow in member-

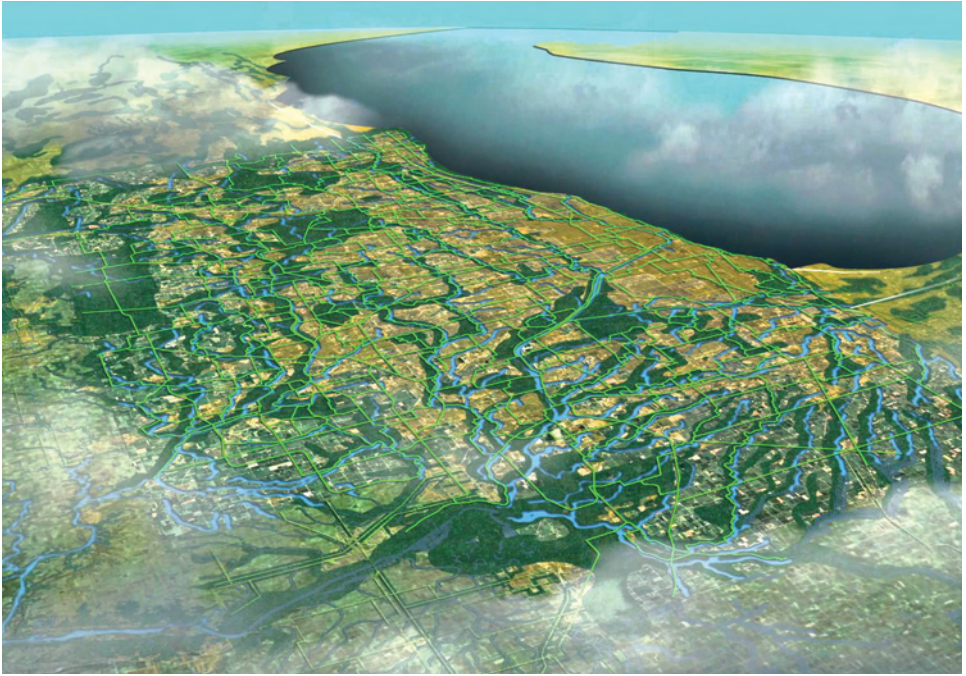


Figure 5. Chicago's GO TO 2040 Regional Plan proposes a green infrastructure network that follows waterway corridors, expands existing preserves, and creates new preserves in the region (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning).

ship and staff and provided the seed money for some of its first projects, such as the magazine and the Biodiversity Recovery Plan. The plan was designed to complement other planning documents in the region while infusing the mission of Chicago Wilderness into those plans. It was also the blueprint for projects and goals for the coalition and still guides the group today through its several initiatives.

Along with restoration, the group promotes education and outreach through the Leave No Child Inside campaign that encourages getting kids out into nature. Outreach continues with its annual Wild Things Conference. This event brings together scientists, citizen scientists, and the general public interested in nature. Workshops and sessions cover a variety of topics of interest from major land restoration projects to nature activities for kids in your backyard. The events have proven successful with membership increasing from those original 34 members to over 250 today. Now it also focuses on climate change as well as biodiversity, education, and green infrastructure.

Moving forward, Chicago Wilderness is seen as a model for other major urban areas to study. Its members consist of a healthy mix of local, state, and federal agencies; business sector partners; and research institutions. So does this mean that Chicago has a regional

park system? How can it with all those park and forest preserve districts and federal agencies owning and managing their own lands? It works because the community as a whole sees Chicago as having a nature reserve of over 370,000 acres of land. From many agencies there is one wilderness.

Endnotes

1. A loose translation of this phrase is “city in wilderness.”
2. Although up for some debate, there is a general consensus that the city’s name is an Anglicized version of an Algonquin word meaning “stinky plant” or “wild onion”; the city’s motto is *Urbs in Horto*, or City in a Garden.
3. *Chicago Park District: History, Background, Organization* (Chicago: Bureau of Parks, 1936), 1.
4. This quote is from the original designation of land use for the lakefront. For more on the battle to preserve Chicago’s lakefront, see Lois Wille, *Forever Open, Clear and Free: The Struggle for Chicago’s Lakefront* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
5. *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, “Annexation.” Online at www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/.
6. Chicago Bureau of Public Efficiency, *Park Government of Chicago* (Chicago: Bureau of Public Efficiency, 1911), 5.
7. *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, “Playground Movement.” Online at www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/.
8. “*Urbs in Horto*,” online at www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/about-us/history/.
9. Julia Sniderman Bachrach, *The City in a Garden: A Photographic History of Chicago’s Parks* (Chicago: The Center for American Places and Chicago Park District, 2001), 11–12.
10. Special Park Commission, *Report of the Special Park Commission to the City Council of Chicago on the Subject of a Metropolitan Park System* (Chicago: Special Park Commission, 1904), 52–55.
11. *Ibid.*, 58–59.
12. *Ibid.*, 1.
13. *Ibid.*, 80.
14. Stephen F. Christy, Jr., “To Preserve and Protect: The Origins of the Forest Preserves,” *Chicago Wilderness* 2:2 (Winter 1999), 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 8.
16. Illinois Commission on Intergovernmental Cooperation, *Legislator’s Guide to Local Governments in Illinois: Special Districts* (Springfield: Illinois Commission on Intergovernmental Cooperation, 2003), 64.
17. Chicago Wilderness, *Biodiversity Recovery Plan* (Chicago: Chicago Wilderness, 1999), 6.
18. Debbie Shore, “What is Chicago Wilderness?” *Chicago Wilderness* 1:1 (Spring 1996), 3.

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