

CASE
STUDY

The Root River in Racine, Wisconsin:

Planning for Riverfront Revitalization

by Helen Sarakinos
River Alliance of Wisconsin
www.wisconsinrivers.org

It started the way many good things start—with a little serendipity and a little crisis. The serendipity was one of timing: a River Alliance of Wisconsin board member and newly elected State Representative took a long walk along his home river, the Root River in Racine. He saw a city struggling to rebuild itself in the post-industrial age that had an underutilized treasure flowing through the heart of it. The crisis emerged with the public unveiling of a development project at the mouth of the river that would have cut off all public access to the riverfront where it met Lake Michigan. After being approached by local citizens and the City, the developer modified the plan to protect public access to the riverfront (eventually, the development was shelved altogether).

The crisis was averted but interest in the river had been rekindled. While the City adopted several

plans for the management and redevelopment of city areas that touch on portions of the Root River, no comprehensive plan existed that tied together all the separate efforts to rejuvenate and promote the river within the City of Racine. And despite major improvements in the water quality of the river over the last 30 years, many still perceive the Root River as “dirty, industrial and contaminated,” as one resident stated.

Local residents and businesspeople came together in a series of “conversations” to talk about their hopes and visions for the Root River. Eventually, the group evolved into the Root River Council.¹ In partnership with the River Alliance of Wisconsin, the Council identified the need to have a more formalized vision for what riverfront

“Just wait till we show you our river!”

Root River Council member Chuck Snyder



Melissa Warner facilitating a group planning session during a “Root River Conversations” charette.

Photo credit: River Alliance of Wisconsin

redevelopment should look like to avoid having to “react” to proposals that have already been developed and brought before the public.

In 2006, the Root River Council embarked on a public outreach effort to develop recommendations for redevelopment of the Root River waterfront based on four guiding principles:²

- 1) Reorient the city to its river;
- 2) Prompt robust, innovative development and growth with a mix of residential, retail and recreational projects;
- 3) Improve habitat and water quality along the river; and
- 4) Promote the participation of citizens and good public process in decisions affecting redevelopment of the waterfront.

Think urban river plans are only achievable in small cities? Think Again.

The Los Angeles River is one of the most channelized rivers in the country, its cement walls intended to provide the quickest conduit for water to flow through the city into the ocean. River advocates, land owners, state and local officials and the National Parks Service's Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program succeeded, however, when in the mid 90s, the Los Angeles River Master Plan was developed. The goals of the LA River Master Plan are to:⁶

- Ensure flood control and public safety needs are met.
- Improve the appearance of the river and the pride of local communities in it.
- Promote the river as an economic asset to the surrounding communities.
- Preserve, enhance and restore environmental resources in and along the river.
- Consider stormwater management alternatives.
- Ensure public involvement and coordinate Master Plan development and implementation among jurisdictions.
- Provide a safe environment and a variety of recreational opportunities along the river.
- Ensure safe access to and compatibility between the river and other activity centers.

Los Angeles is making progress. As of February 2007, the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan consisted of 239 projects, including the establishment of parks, open space, pedestrian and bicycle paths, bridges and channel modification projects, and creation of a flood control channel.⁷

The Root River planning process aimed to meaningfully engage residents in a public dialogue about the role of the Root River in a revitalized urban center. The Root River Council worked directly with different stakeholders who have an interest in the river: neighborhood associations and churches, local businesses, developers, recreational, fishing and environmental groups, local schools, Root-Pike Watershed Initiative Network, Downtown Racine Corporation, members of Common Council

whose districts incorporate the Root River and staff from the City Departments of Public Works, Parks, City Development and the Mayor's office.

Both one-on-one interviews and facilitated group meetings were used to receive public input. Interviews were designed to determine how stakeholders perceive and use the river and what they believe is needed to make the river a more central resource for the city. The public visioning

cont. on page 22

Planning for Riverfront Revitalization, cont.

cont. from page 21

process for the Root River Plan was carried out in three public charettes held in the fall of 2007 and facilitated by UW-Milwaukee's Community Design Solutions.³ These working meetings were designed for small group discussions that enabled residents to learn about the current condition of the Root River and share their opinions about its future. Additionally, the Root River Council distributed surveys to Racine area residents. The survey responses and meeting

July 2008 and unanimously adopted in concept by Common Council. The Plan's recommendations included a mix of both policy changes that continue to be developed, as well as a series of items that were immediately "actionable"—from the placement of canoe launches to working with City Parks Administration on placing vegetated buffers along riverfront parks—that groups of citizens could undertake right away.

“Through an established network of community stakeholders and city administration, the planning process successfully developed a clear, concise and community driven plan.”

Bonnie Prochaska, Root River Council Member

discussions shaped the recommendations in the final plan. Melissa Warner, a charette facilitator and Root River Council Member, was impressed with the level of participation: “People came with interest, imagination and purpose. They contributed ideas on how the riverfront activities would enhance life in Racine, with businesses, residences and entertainment in the urban sector, and recreational amenities and natural enhancements on the upriver sector. The plan that emerged is one that has an exciting and attainable vision for the future.”

City Administration (specifically the Mayor's Office and Departments of City Development, Parks and Public Works) as well as key aldermen and business interests were kept up-to-date on the Root River Council's activities. It was helpful to know that the Mayor and the City Planner saw the value of revitalizing the riverfront; both endorsed and supported the public process.

The final plan, “Back to the Root: An Urban River Revitalization Plan”⁴ was published in

While the vision may take many years to be fully realized, new initiatives have already begun on the Root River. University of Wisconsin-Parkside opened an environmental education and community center that offers recreation and education on the Root River, just west of downtown Racine.⁵ The City completed a comprehensive water quality study of the river in 2007 and, in partnership with the River Alliance of Wisconsin and the business community, is preparing zoning language to formalize and guide development of the river district. But most importantly, residents of Racine are rediscovering their riverfront one boat ride, bike ride and walk at a time, and are beginning to see this namesake river as the source of beauty and inspiration it can be.



¹ www.backtotheroot.org

² This outreach campaign was made possible with funding from the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program, the Racine Community Foundation and the CS Mott Foundation (by way of the River Alliance's participation).

³ www4.uwm.edu/cds

⁴ The final plan and related news articles are available at www.backtotheroot.org.

⁵ www.uwp.edu/departments/community.partnerships/environmentalcentersec.cfm

⁶ ladpw.org/wmd/watershed/LA/larmp_mission.cfm

⁷ www.lariverrmp.org/Media/documents/RiverPlanCNS.doc