

PRESERVATION PLAN FOR PROMONTORY POINT IN BURNHAM PARK

Presented by the Hyde Park Historical Society and the Community Task Force for Promontory Point

Introduction

The seawall which lines much of Chicago's Lake Michigan coastline has deep historic, aesthetic and recreational value to the citizens and communities who use it, residents and visitors to Chicago alike. It also serves an important engineering purpose, preventing erosion of the parkland at the lake's shore. As the original shoreline revetment, built in the 1930s of quarried limestone, enters its seventh decade of use, the City of Chicago has turned its attention to its repair and replacement. Construction work on the revetment began in 1998, and will span almost ten years before it is done.

The background of this project starts much earlier, as far back as 1974, when the City and the federal government began to work together to assess the extent of the work needed, and to bring federal dollars to the City to help fund construction. The process involved studies and meetings, Congressional oversight and public input. By 1994, when the Army Corps of Engineers published their feasibility report ("Illinois Shoreline Erosion, Interim III Wilmette to Illinois State Line"), a long and careful process of seeking participation, comment, and input from the public and from governmental agencies on every level had been documented and included in the report to Congress. The single strongest item of concern, "articulated throughout the project evaluation period," was the expression of a preference for a limestone step-stone design matching the existing design, designated "Plan IV," rather than the Corps' rubblemound plan. Indeed, various departments in the City of Chicago (the "local sponsors") worked hard for the step-stone. The Corps responded: "The step-stone revetment plan was considered the preferred plan by the local sponsors and a number of public and private entities."

Typical among comments [*italics added*]:

- from the Illinois Department of Transportation: "To recommend rubblemound revetments in areas that formerly provided *significant passive and active recreational and aesthetic opportunities*, and which has made Chicago one of the premier urban waterfronts in the country, as the federal supportable plan would not seem to be in the Corps' best interest. ... [T]he lead state agency for the state of Illinois, supports Plan IV."

- from the US Department of the Interior: "[W]e believe that Plan IV would be *aesthetically preferable* to the other structural alternatives."

- from the Lake Michigan Federation: "[We] support the step stone revetment plan on the grounds that: ... the Chicago lakefront is a renown model for *public access and aesthetics along an urban shoreline* ... this plan is *sensitive to the Chicago historic heritage*, including the Lake Michigan shoreline and the historic lakefront parks ... this plan represents citizen interests and involves *meaningful citizen participation*..."

- from the Jackson Park Advisory Council: "[We] approve the plan to rebuild the step stone revetments ...*The accessibility of the lake to the public and the aesthetic quality* of the lakefront are tremendous financial assets to Chicago."

- from Friends of the Parks: "[We] support Plan IV, the rebuilding of the step stone revetments..."

- from 4th Ward Alderman Toni Preckwinkle: The "step-stone plan will also maintain safe access to the shoreline while *preserving its historical and aesthetic value.*"

- and from individual concerned citizens: "The *aesthetics* of the lakefront are extremely important...;" "I *strongly* prefer the stepping stones...;" "Please choose stepstone revetments...;" "Please use the stepstone revetment approach..."

The City's own planning objectives for the project matched the public desire: The City of Chicago's stated policy was to "preserve the cultural, historical, and recreational heritage of the lakeshore parks." The Chicago Park District stated that "[o]ne key objective of the CPD is to insure that [the new revetment] would not reduce or limit the historical emphasis of the Park District on shore accessibility, safety, and aesthetics for park users." Indeed, the City and various agencies within it fought hard, alongside an impassioned public, for the step-stone design.

The message was clear, and the Corps responded: "The step-stone was analyzed from an engineering, economic and environmental perspective and was shown to be feasible. ... Accordingly, in view of the local support for the step-stone revetment plan, the Corps of Engineers elected to recommend that plan for implementation."

The US Congress then authorized the building of the Corps-approved step-stone revetment design, and committed federal money to its construction.

Where the shoreline revetment borders historic properties, like Promontory Point, the legislation goes further: Government agencies drafted and signed an agreement for the historical preservation of properties on or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The Memorandum of Agreement specifies "that the design and construction of the revetment will match the existing" revetment on those properties. That Agreement is signed by the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, by the City of Chicago, by the Chicago Park District, by the Army Corps of Engineers, and by the Illinois Historic Preservation Officer. **The Agreement is part of the legislation, is still in force, and governs the work to be done at Promontory Point.**

No where in the 358-page document [House Document 103-302] governing federal interest in Chicago's lakefront construction does the concrete and steel design appear.

The Hyde Park Historical Society, the Community Task Force for Promontory Point, and the broad consensus of community park users continue to advocate for and support the preservation of the limestone step-stone revetment at Promontory Point. The Community Task Force is a broad-based citizens' group charged by the community with representing its interests at the Point, and with coordinating an extraordinary effort of community

investment in research and expert studies to support a limestone preservation plan. The community has raised over \$50,000 to fund studies by two coastal engineers, a national expert on access for persons with disabilities, and two preservation architects. These studies are intended to help the Park District to develop a preservation plan consistent with the federal legislation, with the Memorandum of Agreement, and with the desires of the community.

This report details one such preservation plan. It incorporates sound contemporary engineering, meaningful accessibility, and historic preservation. It is beautifully designed, elegantly balancing the sometimes competing needs of engineering and aesthetics. It is consistent with the Memorandum of Agreement and is therefore federally supportable. The significance of this report is that it proves the feasibility of a historic preservation of the limestone revetment at Promontory Point which meets economic, engineering, recreational and aesthetic requirements.

The Hyde Park Historical Society, the Community Task Force for Promontory Point, and community park users offer this document to the Chicago Park District in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration as they work to design the revetment at Promontory Point. This plan answers the concerns of the Park District as it struggles to integrate proper engineering, compliance with federal legislation, including its preservation agreement, and the wishes of the citizens and communities of Chicago. This report provides meaningful solutions to real problems. We intend to work side by side with the Park District to insure that we treat Promontory Point with the dignity and respect of a historical landmark of the City of Chicago. This extraordinary park deserves an extraordinary collaboration between city agencies and our community.