

# CHICAGO PORTAGE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE MASTER PLAN

PREPARED FOR THE FOREST PRESERVES OF COOK COUNTY  
DECEMBER 2018



PREPARED BY

**DESIGNWORKSHOP**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the Forest Preserves of Cook County team, the many interested and invested stakeholder groups and stewards of the Chicago Portage National Historic Site, and the community members who shared their ideas, expertise, and vision for this history-rich site:

Thank You!

Prepared For: Forest Preserves of Cook County

Planning Consultant: Design Workshop, Inc.

Stakeholder Groups directly consulted:

Friends of the Chicago Portage

Friends of the Forest Preserves

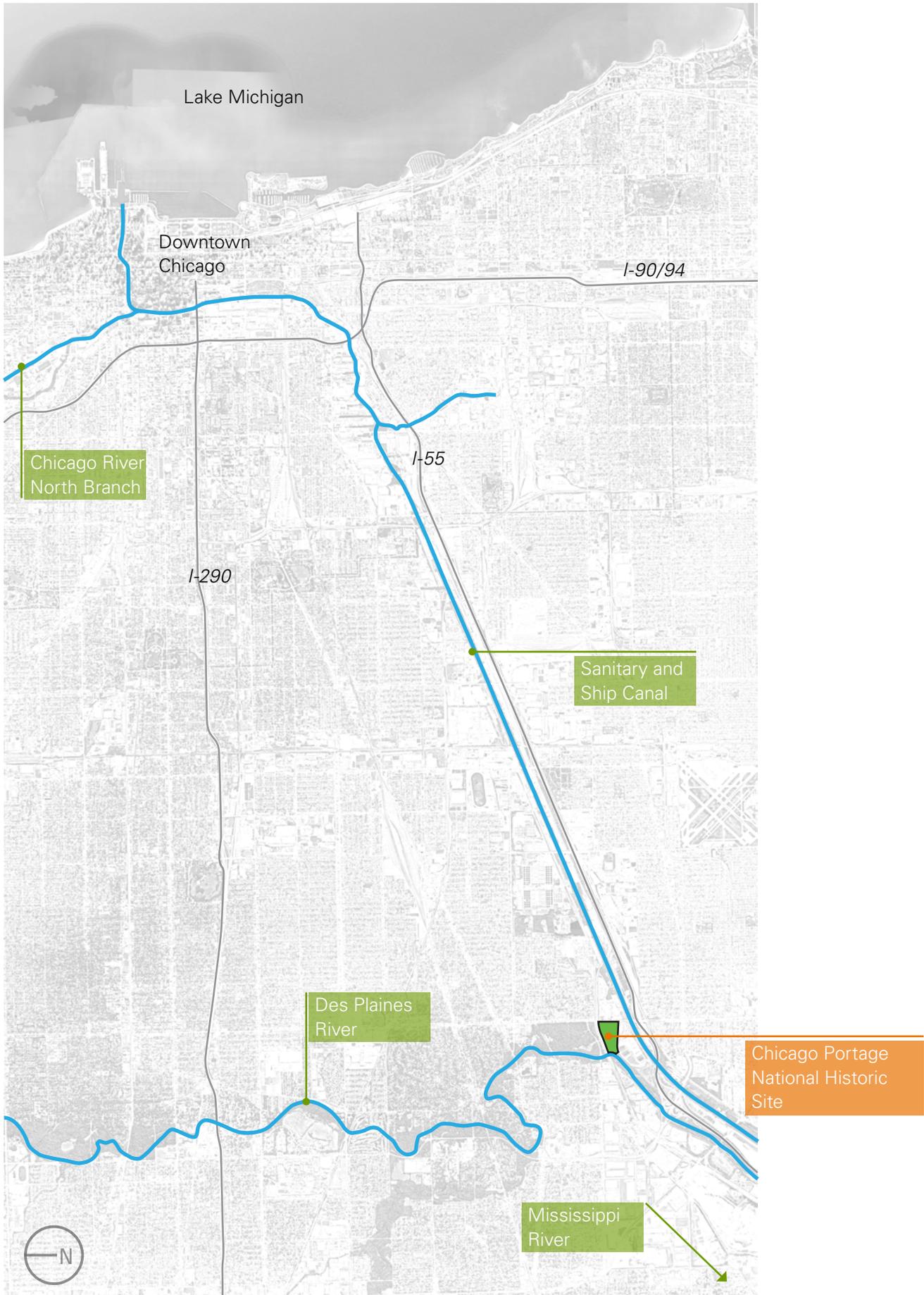
Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Canal Corridor Association

Civic Center Authority

## CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
PRIOR STUDIES	1
EXISTING CONDITIONS	7
SITE CONTEXT	9
SITE ASSETS	11
IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES	13
RECOMMENDATIONS	21



Lake Michigan

Downtown Chicago

I-90/94

Chicago River North Branch

I-55

I-290

Sanitary and Ship Canal

Des Plaines River

Chicago Portage National Historic Site

Mississippi River



CONTEXT MAP | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## WHY CREATE A MASTER PLAN?

The Chicago Portage Historic Site Master Plan explores ideas and recommendations for the future of the National Historic Site owned and managed by the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The purpose of the report is to provide both short term and long term strategies for:

- 1 Improving public awareness of the portage and connectivity to the site,
- 2 Enhancing accessibility within the site and to adjacent areas,
- 3 Encouraging a greater and deeper understanding of the portage story,
- 4 Improving site facilities, and
- 5 Clarifying operational and management systems for the site.

Though there have been planning efforts in the past regarding the site, and significant improvements have been completed in recent years, this comprehensive Master Plan document serves to guide future decisions regarding upgrades, programs, and strategies for enhancing the Portage Site.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHICAGO PORTAGE

The Chicago Portage Historic Site, one of only two National Historic Sites (NHS) in Illinois, marks the approximate location of the western end of the historic portage linking the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River. The portage, used for thousands of years by the local Native American groups, provided an overland route bridging the gap between the Chicago River to the east and the Des Plaines River to the west. In 1673, French explorer Louis Jolliet and missionary Father Jacques Marquette were led through the portage by the Native Americans, creating the idea for a permanent navigable canal. Years later, this idea of a water connection became the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, a crucial catalyst for Chicago's strategic location and growth as a gateway city for the American west. This historic significance makes the Portage Site a unique holding of the Forest Preserves and creates opportunities for attracting more visitors to the site through strategic site improvements.

## STUDY PROCESS

Every successful planning effort begins with support of core stakeholders including community members, volunteer and non-profit organizations, and the client team. This Master Plan study began with a factual **analysis of existing site conditions** (page 10) through mapping, on-site observation, and review of previous planning efforts (page 4). To begin understanding potential opportunities for improving the Portage Site, a **public stakeholder charrette** (page 17) was held, in which participants were able to give open-ended feedback about the possible opportunities for the future of the site. A keypad poll was also completed to help quantify stakeholder feedback and inform the recommendations. After the draft report was completed using stakeholder feedback from the charrette, a **public open house** (page 17) was held to gather feedback on the recommendations as a whole and begin the process of prioritizing the recommendations (page 24). The final Master Plan document will be used as a general guide for future decision making at the Portage Site.



Salt Creek Greenway | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# PRIOR STUDIES

One of the most important tasks in a master planning effort is the review and assessment of prior work completed for the project study area. In this review, the new work avoids “reinventing the wheel” by rehashing previously analyzed topics, and also uses prior studies as a foundation for further analysis.

The planning team used prior studies — in this case from 1975 and 1989 — as a starting point to understand what questions should be asked for a master plan to be completed four or five decades later. These early studies were ambitious in scope and vision and showed what the Portage Historic Site could be, although few of the plan components ever came to fruition.

The second set of work, more recently from 2015 and 2016, gives the planning team a reference point for recent efforts that the Forest Preserves has undertaken to enhance and highlight the Portage Site and its unique story. The team used recommendations and implemented projects from these more recent efforts as a foundation for the creation of the Master Plan.

# 1975

## DESIGN STUDY FOR THE CHICAGO PORTAGE



### SUMMARY

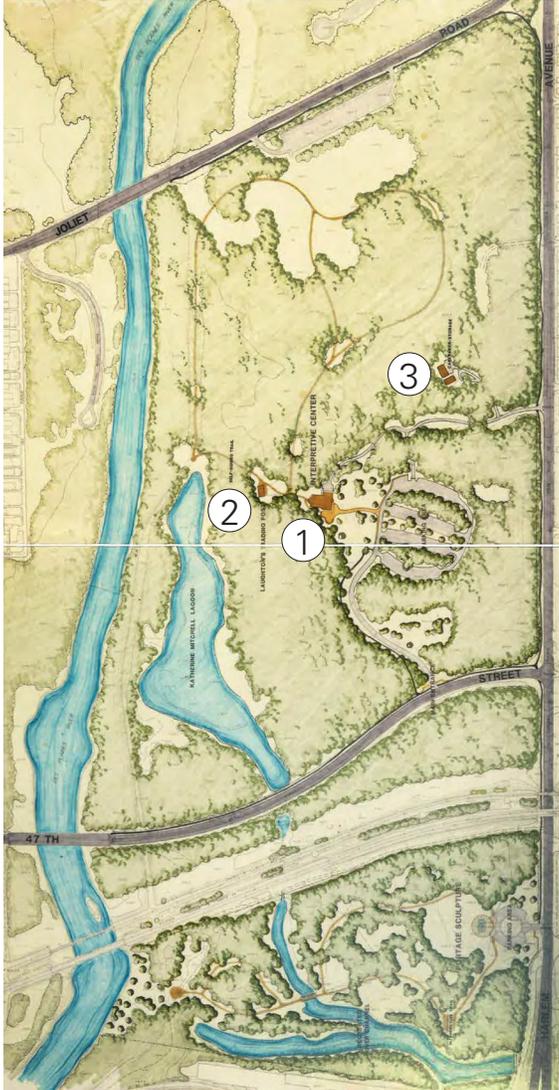
The 1975 Design Study, prepared by Wm. E. Rose and Associates, Inc. for the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, documented the historical significance of the Chicago Portage and proposed the development of facilities for interpreting historical features of the area and accommodating visitors to the site. Among the significant recommendations, the Study proposed creating an Interpretive Center, Resident Historian home, and Pedestrian Bridge.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Provide an **Interpretive Center** building at Ottawa Woods to accommodate an estimated 600,000 visitors annually
  - Establish a **trail system** for safe pedestrian access to important areas
- 2 Build a **pedestrian bridge** to span 47th Street and the railroad tracks, connecting Ottawa Woods to the Portage Site
  - Build a **pedestrian and bicycle pathway system** connecting the surrounding neighborhoods and Preserves to a major public entrance
  - Provide safe and accommodating **vehicular circulation and parking**
- 3 Provide facilities for an on-site maintenance program including **home for a resident historian** and watchman at Ottawa Woods
  - Construct a map as the **major interpretive feature** at the site of the Chicago Portage
  - Provide **seating, restroom facilities and drinking fountains** at the site of the map
  - Erect sufficient **fencing** to control unauthorized access to the site

# 1989

## INTERPRETIVE CENTER APPLICATION



### SUMMARY

The 1989 Interpretive Center Application, full name “Application for State Financial Support for the Chicago Portage Historical Site Interpretive Center”, was prepared by the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Civic Center Authority. The application describes the historic significance of the site along with the estimated market and demographics that would support a new interpretive program including a new interpretive center, replica historic buildings, and an expanded trail network.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ① Planned a major **interpretive facility and visitor center** for Ottawa Trail Woods north of 47th Street
  - **Site improvements at Ottawa Woods** include: an entrance drive, parking facilities, service drives, landscaping, lighting and signage, fencing, entrance structure, widening and deepening of Katherine Mitchell Lagoon
- ② **Laughton’s trading post** be reconstructed
- ③ A **historian’s residence and maintenance facility** be constructed
  - A new **trail network** connect all features on the site
  - Improvements **south of 47th Street** include parking improvements, concrete deck & wall around the monument, trail improvement, and fencing improvement

### Cost Estimates for Implementation:

**Phase 1:** Portage Site, south of 47th Street  
Cost: \$568,000

**Phase 2:** Ottawa Trail Woods, north of 47th Street  
Cost: \$3,333,000

**Phase 3:** Construction and site improvements  
Cost: \$2,051,600

# 2013

## SITE INTERPRETIVE SCHEMATIC PLAN

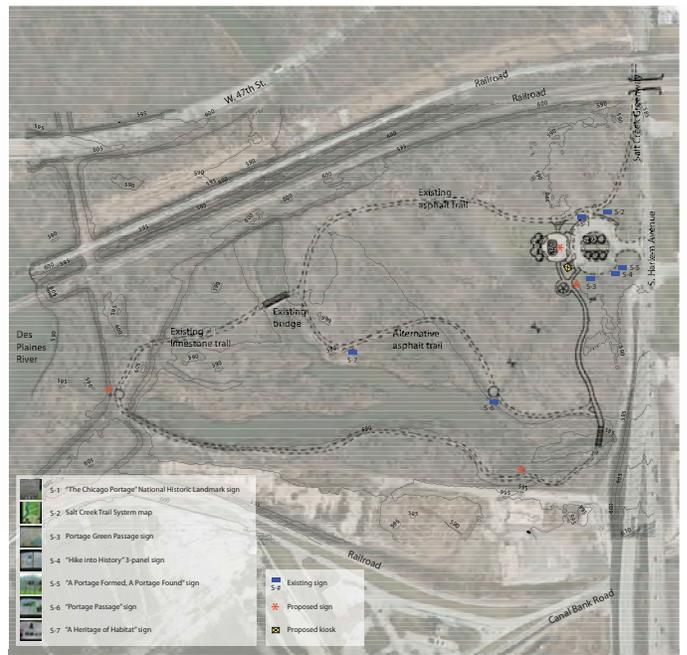
### SUMMARY

In 2013, a schematic plan was created for the Portage Site, led by Hitchcock Design Group. This plan recommended a new shelter, interpretive signage improvements, and trail/site improvements. This plan helped guide the implementation of wayfinding and interpretive signage elements and new picnic shelter in 2016.



**30% Schematic: Existing Conditions**  
Chicago Portage National Historic Site  
Lyons, Illinois

HITCHCOCK DESIGN GROUP  
Forest Preserve District of Cook County  
Pulse Design, Inc.



**30% Schematic Design**  
Chicago Portage National Historic Site  
Lyons, Illinois

HITCHCOCK DESIGN GROUP  
Forest Preserve District of Cook County  
Pulse Design, Inc.

# 2015

## GATEWAY MASTER PLAN

### SUMMARY

The goal of the Gateway Master Plan, prepared in 2015 by The Lakota Group, was to “define a class of special gateway sites equitably distributed throughout the Forest Preserves to encourage people to enter into the Preserves.”



### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Improving wayfinding:

- Update + implement the Signage and Wayfinding Master Plan
- Update site maps and wayfinding markers
- Implement recommendations of the Trail Master Plan
- Explore the potential for “Brown Board Signs” with IDOT

#### Improving site amenities:

- Memorialize existing standards for site amenities
- Improve and enhance parking areas at gateway sites
- Use landscape improvements as a site amenity
- Elevate transit opportunities for accessing gateway sites
- Cluster site amenities to enhance access and effectiveness

#### Improving sense of place:

- Formalize policy for public art, interpretation and performance
- Complete a system-wide interpretive master plan
- Use restoration work
- Develop site specific lighting plans
- Use infrastructure improvements

#### Improving access to outdoor recreation and volunteering:

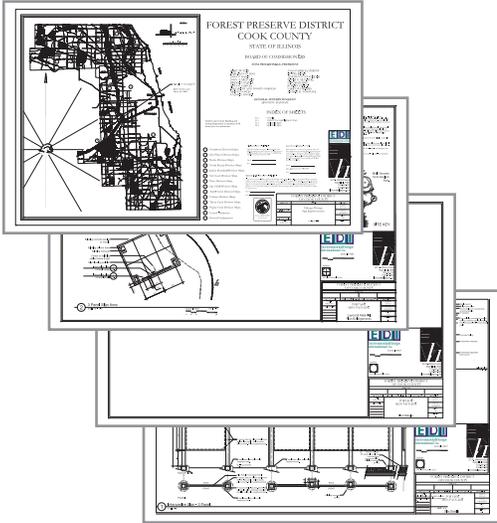
- Perform an Americans with Disabilities Act facility assessment
- Partner with public transit agencies to enhance access
- Develop motivational signage to encourage physical activities
- Educate the public about the health benefits of nature
- Establish partnerships with health organizations and clubs

#### Promoting gateway sites:

- Determine role of gateway sites marketing and communication
- Consider off-site locations to host visitor information
- Expand the use of emerging technologies
- Develop a gateway site staff training and related tool kit
- Develop a gateway site docent or ambassador program
- Identify the role of partners at gateway sites
- Consider sponsorships for gateway site amenities or events

# 2016

## WAYFINDING AND SIGNAGE IMPROVEMENTS



### SUMMARY

In 2016, new interpretive signage for the site was designed and later installed. This effort, led by Hitchcock Design Group and Environmental Design International along with TJS Design, resulted in a much improved interpretive visitor experience, including an interpretive pavilion, vivid storytelling graphics, and an illustrated Portage Site timeline at the base of the Portage monument.

The improvements signified a commitment to the Portage Site on the part of the Forest Preserves and a recognition that the Portage is a unique asset to the county and region.



# EXISTING CONDITIONS

Understanding the existing conditions of a site and its surroundings is the initial step in any planning project. Through an in-depth knowledge of the site's assets and strengths, the team was able to build a narrative of the site's opportunities for the future and address any challenges for the future. Through multiple site visits, analysis of aerial and GIS maps, and conversations with site stakeholders and experts, the team was able to understand the existing conditions and context of the Portage Site to inform the recommendations of the plan.



CONTEXT MAP | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# SITE CONTEXT

## **PORTAGE CONTEXT AND CONNECTIONS**

In the case of this Master Plan, understanding the site's immediate context helps ensure the long-term success of the Portage. Opportunities for increasing accessibility and connectivity to the Portage, through all modes of transportation, from surrounding communities and the region as a whole, are made evident in the contextual view.

Challenges for connecting the Portage Site to adjacent open spaces and communities is evident in its setting, as it is physically bounded on all sides: by a BNSF and CN railroad right-of-way to the north; a CSDX railroad right-of-way to the south; high-traffic Harlem Avenue to the east, and the Des Plaines River to the west. The only opportunity for expansion of the site or physical additions is in the MWRD-owned vacant land directly to the south of Portage.

The Salt Creek Greenway serves as the primary trail connector for cyclists and pedestrians to and from the Portage Site, which is currently the southern terminus and trailhead.

Vehicular access is easy with the site entry less than a half-mile from the Harlem Avenue exit on Interstate 55 just 12 miles from Downtown Chicago.



CONTEXT MAP | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# SITE ASSETS

- ① Portage Site Vehicular Entry
- ② Portage Monument
- ③ Pavilion / Interpretive Signage
- ④ Footbridge
- ⑤ River Levee
- ⑥ Salt Creek Greenway Terminus
- ⑦ Kinder Morgan Harlem Terminal
- ⑧ Railroad Bridge Underpass
- ⑨ Mowed Walking Path
- ⑩ Gravel Loop Trail





Interpretive Signage | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES

Identifying opportunities for improvement is the ultimate goal of this Master Plan. Beginning with a base knowledge about the site's existing conditions and prior studies, the next step for moving forward is gathering feedback and ideas from the community and stakeholders who care about the site and want to see it succeed. Starting here as a basis for recommendations by the planning team is essential — with stakeholder input we are able to gather years, even decades of institutional knowledge about this unique place and embed those memories, experiences, and dreams into defined, implementable recommendations.

# PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

## STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH

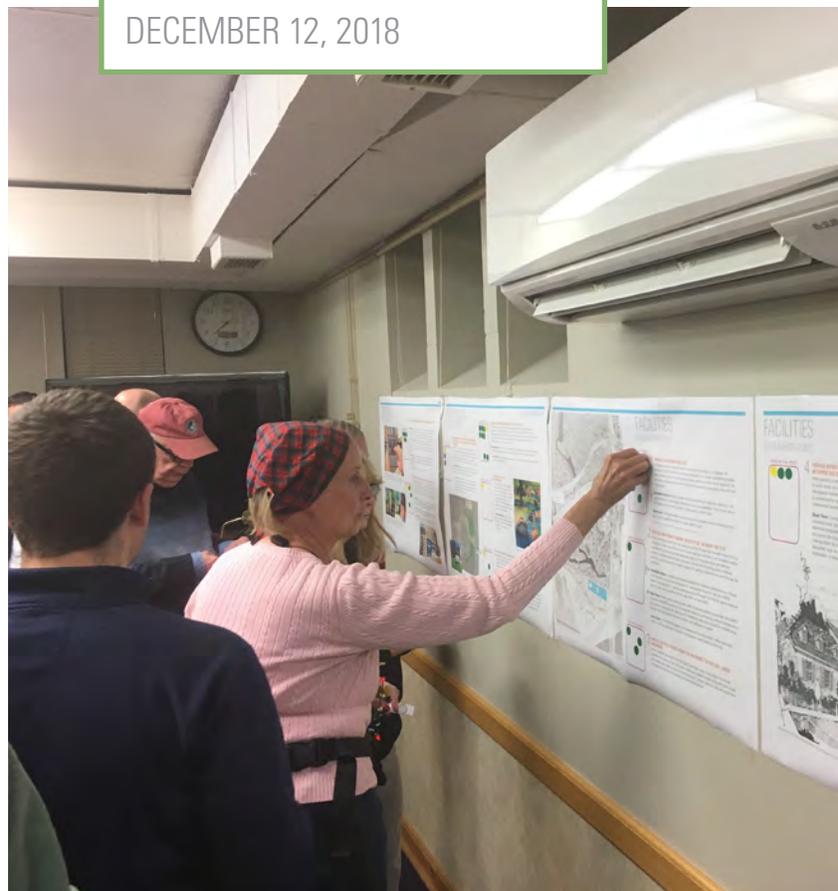
Successful planning for the Portage Historic Site includes a collaborative process and working with the community and key stakeholders to define a comprehensive vision for the future. Community engagement helps reveal complex site conditions and identifies the site's strengths and opportunities for the future.

The Portage Stakeholder Charrette consisted of a brief presentation highlighting prior planning work for the site and existing conditions assessment, and a public input session where participants answered multiple-choice polling questions and open-ended questions in breakout discussion groups. The session helped gather stakeholders' feedback on the opportunities to improve the site's amenities, connections to neighborhoods, programming, and other items. After the Draft Master Plan was completed, a public Open House session was held to receive feedback on the plan recommendations. Participants were able to cast votes for project implementation priority and provide open-ended feedback on the recommendations.

CHARRETTE  
OCTOBER 03, 2018



OPEN HOUSE  
DECEMBER 12, 2018



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## EMERGING THEMES FROM THE CHARRETTE



Improve access to the site from neighborhoods



Add canoe landing to Portage Site along Des Plaines River



Improve trail and regional greenway connections to site and on-trail wayfinding



Find opportunities for added parking capacity during special events



Increase interpretive signage throughout the site



Increase web presence + create central hub of information



Connect visitors to the Portage Site through mobile technology



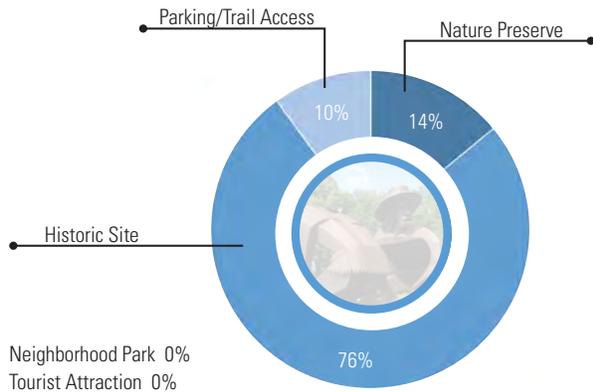
Create clear strategy + roles for implementation and governan



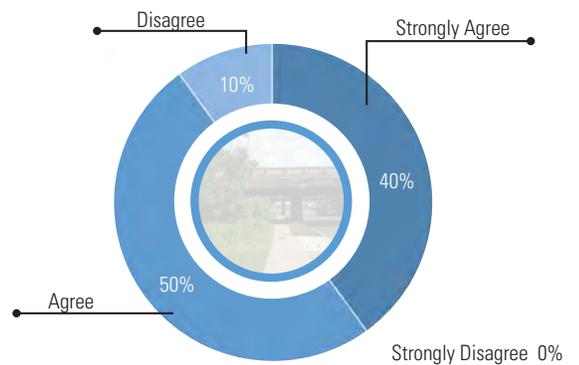
# SURVEY RESULTS

Questions were posed to participants at the charrette session and live anonymous results were obtained from keypad polling devices.

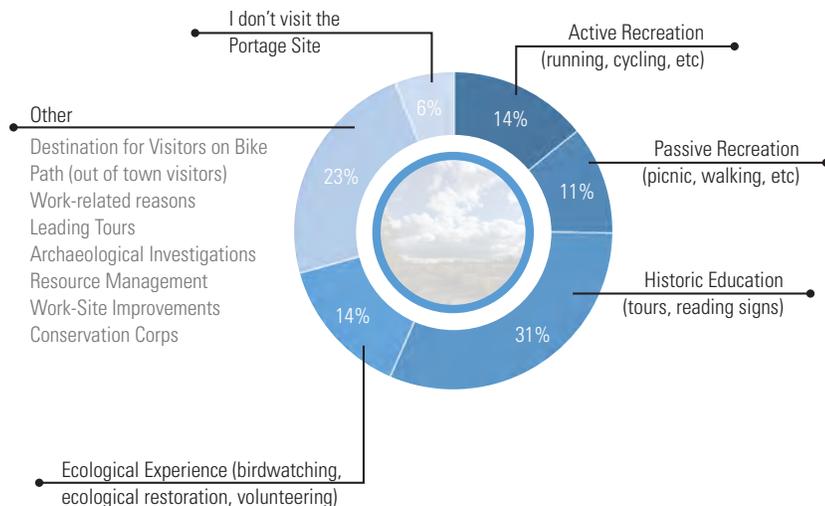
## The Portage Site is a . . .



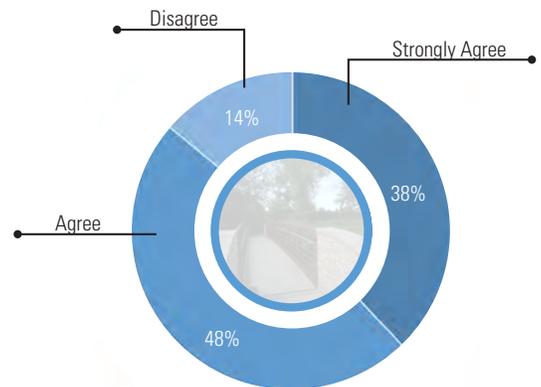
## I would support increased accessibility to the site through public transportation



## I primarily visit the Portage Site for the following activities

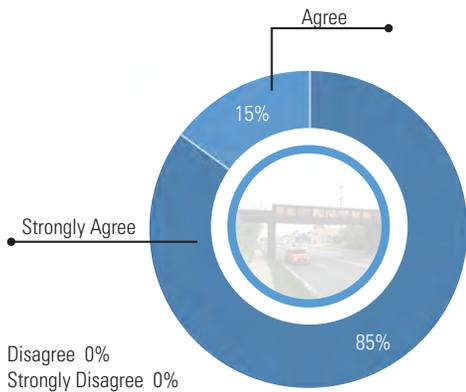


## I would support more programming and events at the Portage Site

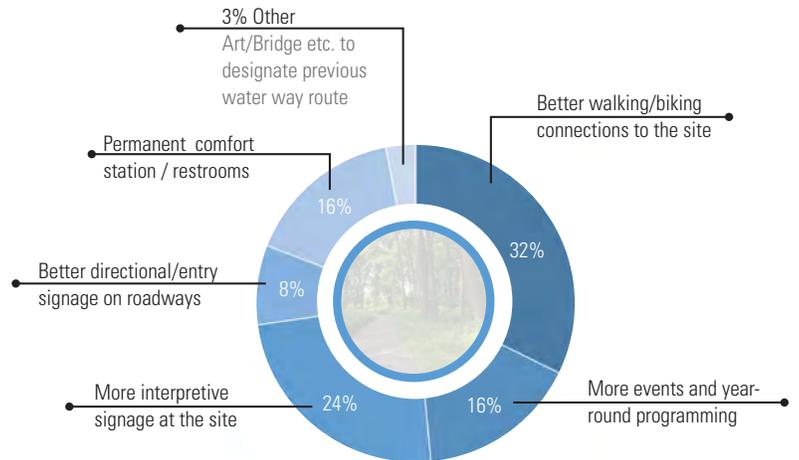


# SURVEY RESULTS

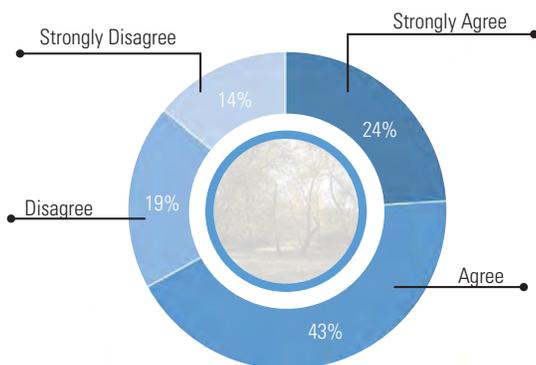
I would support increased accessibility to the site through pedestrian and bike networks



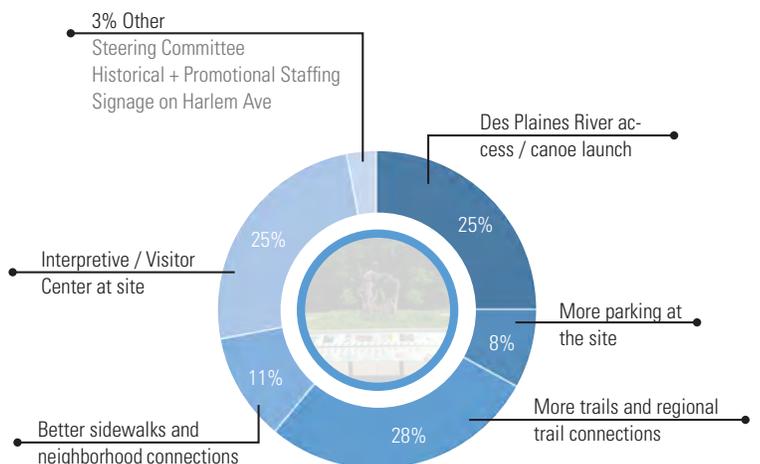
What type of improvements do you want to see in the short term (0-2 years)?



I would support increasing parking capacity at the Portage Site



What type of improvements do you want to see in the long term (2-5 years)?



# VISITOR INPUT

## SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

Though a comprehensive survey of existing site visitors was not within the scope of this Master Plan, a recommendation to conduct a more thorough analysis of site visitors and vehicle counts is included in the Site Visibility chapter. That will create a baseline of data regarding existing site users. To date, social media use and online content has provided the planning team with some initial feedback from members of the public. Some examples are included below:



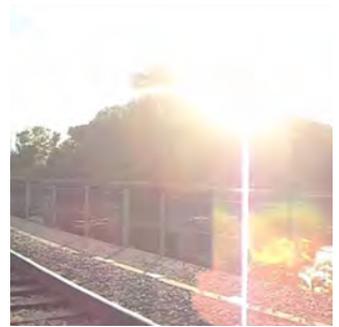
A different view of the Chicago Portage National Historic Site at 48th & Harlem.

bernietafoya

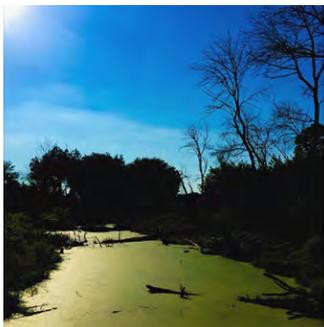


#fall #nofilter #pixel2xl

taivaanpii



emythegreat95



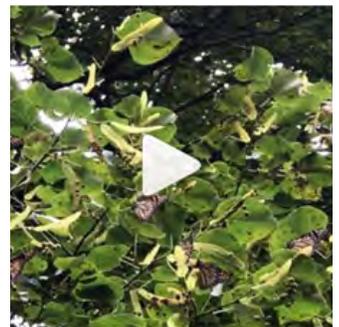
Welcome to the Swamp

shoot\_raw\_by\_rio



In 1673 Led by American Indians. Explores Marquette and Jolliet became the first Europeans to cross the Portage. This route encouraged the Development of the I & M Canal and the growth of Chicago.

shoot\_raw\_by\_rio



Look carefully. We must have counted at least 30 monarchs floating around. Amazing

dougie\_mc



lmao\_inhibitor



richh55



monadmolina

# VISITOR INPUT

## ONLINE REVIEWS

A variety of online reviews, via Google, help reveal the opinion and perspective of a small sample of the general public. Certainly, this data does not comprise a statistically significant analysis of user preferences and further study is recommended to fully understand public opinion.



★★★★★  
Kolleen Ritz  
July 2018

I brought my dog here recently, and it's a great loop to walk. It's a nice change from our normal walks around the neighborhood. Parking is easy and you can learn some history about the region.

I'd love if there were permanent bathrooms, but there is a port-a-potty if you're desperate.



★★★★★  
Gaurav Mishra  
August 2018

It's a great place. So serene so quiet and it's an amazing place to be just outside the city.

★★★★★  
Roland Spies  
August 2018

Highly recommend the Friends of the Portage tour on the first Saturday of the month.



★★★★★  
Bruce Weisseg  
June 2018

While this is a nice park, having walked the entire trail it totally fails to convey any sense of why this site was such an historic site as a portage between the Great Lakes and the Des Plaines River / Mississippi River system. There is no sense at all of the "portage", just a nice small park.

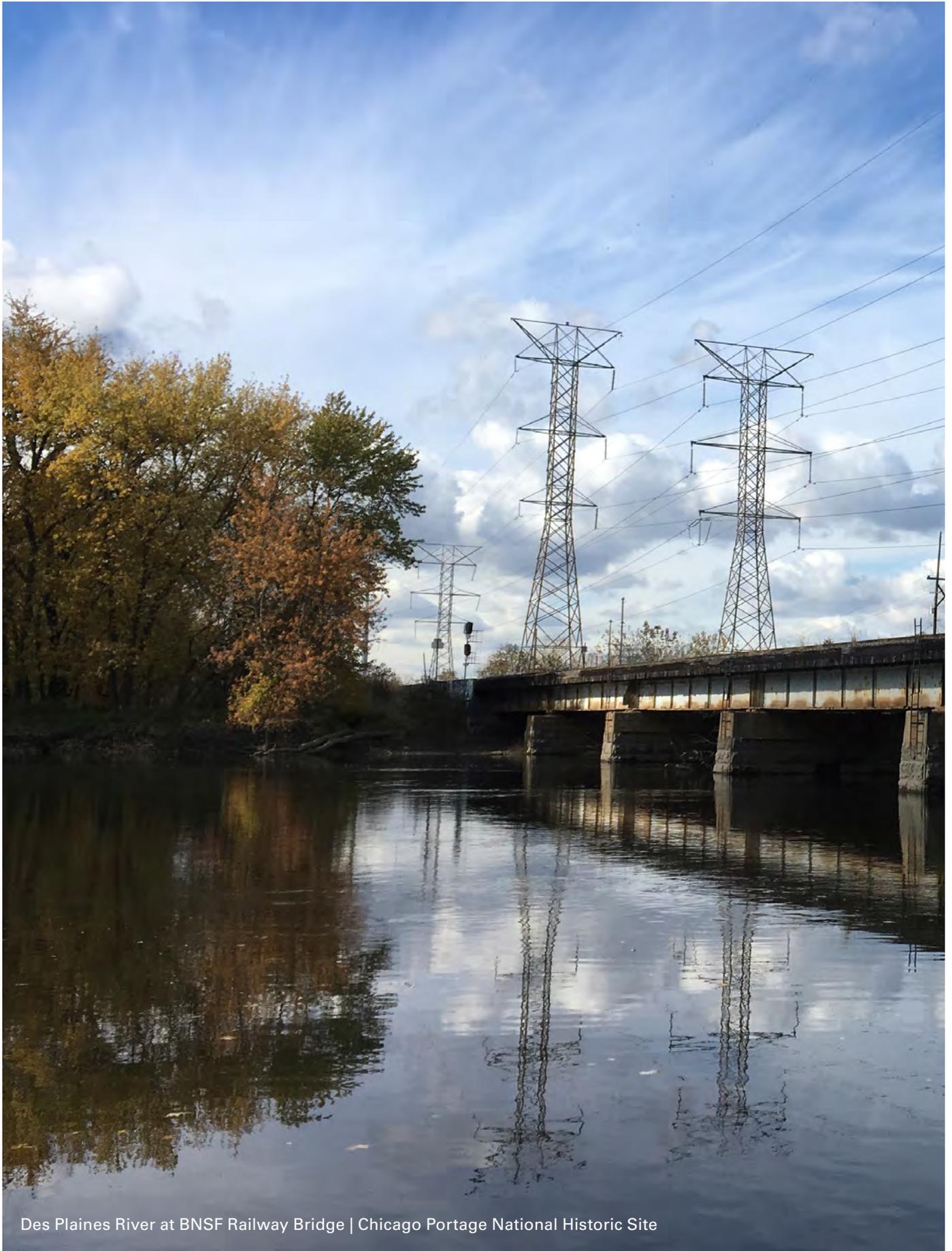
★★★★★  
Emily Wolff  
May 2018

Beautiful spot. To bad they don't do more to preserve it. So much history and it's not well known.



★★★★★  
Kelli K.  
December 2018

Clean peaceful walking trails. Wasn't very busy went I went at 330 in the afternoon. Not a real big area but still a nice getaway from the city.



Des Plaines River at BNSF Railway Bridge | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are organized into five main categories, listed below. Recommendations are informed by feedback from stakeholders, charrette participants, site investigations and discussions with the planning team and are not listed in order of significance.

## **1. Getting There**

How can people more easily know about and get to the Portage Site?

## **2. Getting Around**

How can the Portage Site experience be made more accessible?

## **3. Experiencing the Portage Story**

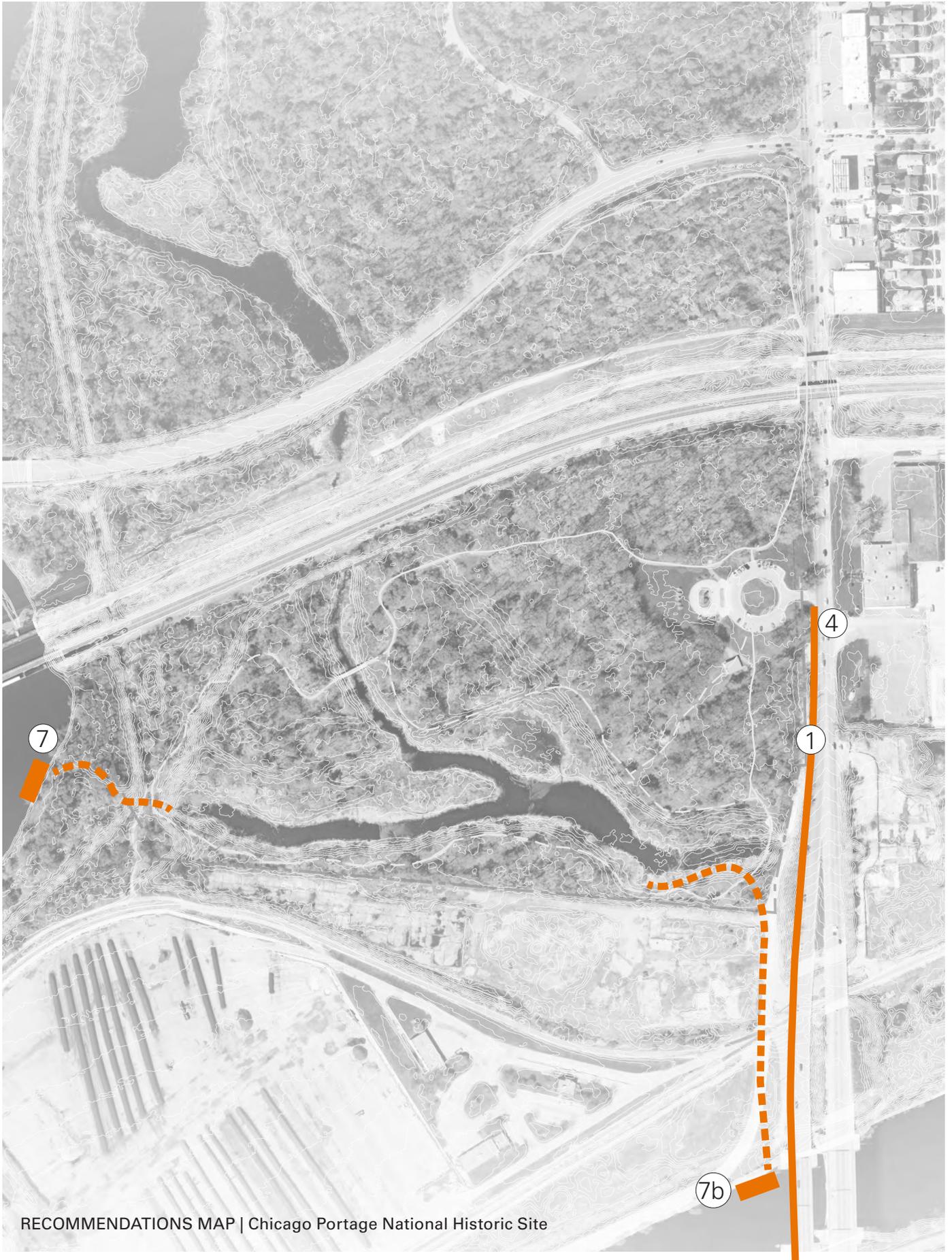
How can the experience of the site and Portage story be improved?

## **4. Spending Time There**

How can the physical amenities at the Portage Site be improved?

## **5. Enhancing Site Operations & Governance**

How can operational roles and site governance be clarified or enhanced?



RECOMMENDATIONS MAP | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# GETTING THERE

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1 WORK WITH IDOT TO IMPROVE SIDEWALKS ALONG HARLEM AVENUE AND ADD SIDEWALKS WHERE GAPS EXIST

Lack of continuous sidewalk access to the Portage Site from adjacent neighborhoods creates unsafe conditions for pedestrians and cyclists, and discourages visitors from arriving by bicycle or by walking. Feedback from the charrette indicated that this issue was especially prevalent along Harlem Avenue south of the Portage Site.

**! Immediate Action:** Engage the Village of Summit in discussions about ways to improve pedestrian connections across the Harlem Avenue bridge over the Sanitary and Ship Canal.

**Long Term:** Partipate in a multi-stakeholder team working with IDOT, the Village of Summit, and the City of Chicago to widen sidewalks and improve pedestrian safety along Harlem Avenue.

### 2 WORK WITH IDOT TO PLACE ADDITIONAL WAYFINDING AND IDENTITY SIGNAGE ALONG HARLEM AVENUE AND INTERSTATE 55

Along Harlem Avenue and Interstate 55, there are existing “brown signs” directing motorists to nearby historic attractions, such as Historic Riverside. However, there are no signs mentioning the site of the Chicago Portage, one of the most historically significant sites in the region. Creating additional opportunities for drivers, especially daily commuters, to know the existence of the Chicago Portage may help drive new visitors to the site.

**! Immediate Action:** Consult with IDOT regarding the warrants and procedures for installing brown historic attraction signs along Harlem Avenue and Interstate 55. Reach out to the Canal Corridor Association to discuss whether additional Portage Site signage can be paired with I & M Canal Signage along the highway (see below).

**Long Term:** Consult with IDOT to install signs before the southbound and northbound exits on Interstate 55, and southbound and northbound entries to the Portage Site.

Headed southbound on Interstate 55. Is there an opportunity here for Portage-specific signage?

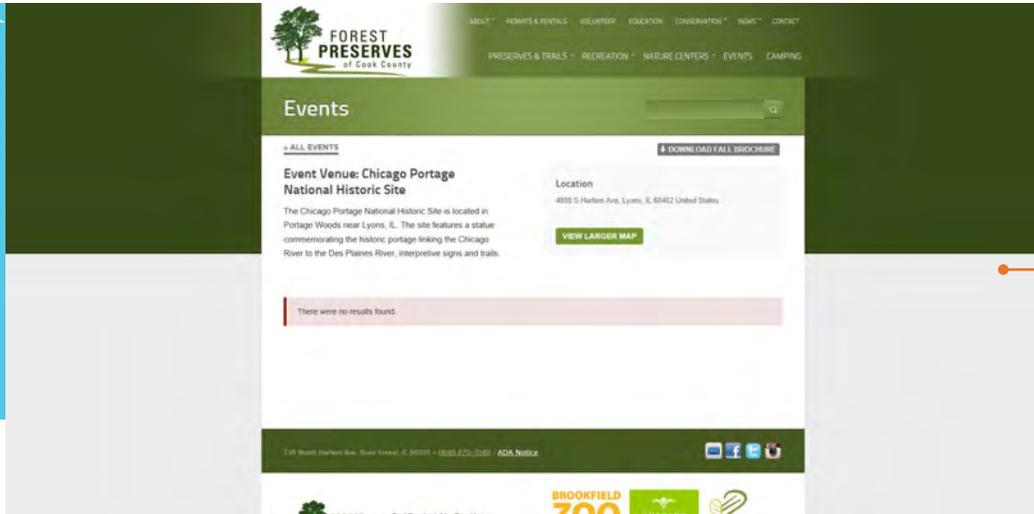


# GETTING THERE

## RECOMMENDATIONS

3

Forest Preserves of Cook County



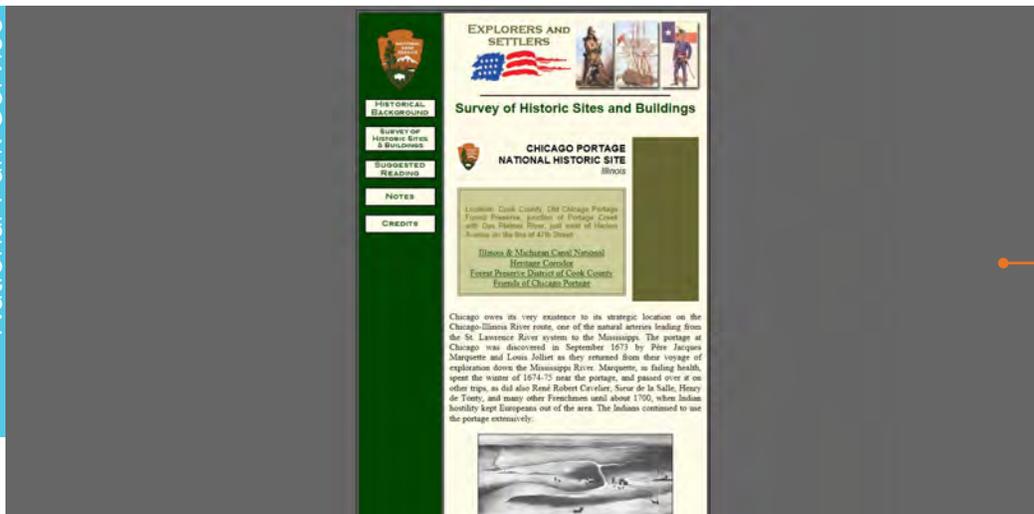
[fpdcc.com/venue/chicago-portage-national-historic-site](http://fpdcc.com/venue/chicago-portage-national-historic-site)

Friends of the Chicago Portage



[drupal.library.cmu.edu/chicago/node/131](http://drupal.library.cmu.edu/chicago/node/131)

National Park Service



[nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/explorers/siteb1.htm](http://nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/explorers/siteb1.htm)

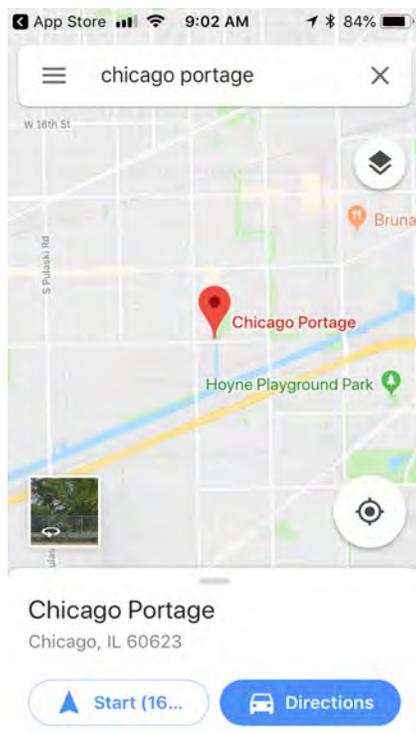
### 3 IMPROVE AND SIMPLIFY THE PORTAGE SITE'S WEB PRESENCE

A lack of centralized information about the Portage Site on the internet leads to confusion and uncertainty for someone wanting to learn about the Chicago Portage Historic Site. With three entities all hosting separate and varying levels of information about the site (see left), there is no single place to go for information. Additionally, some search terms for the Portage Site could lead visitors to the incorrect location if using an online mapping application.

**Immediate Action:** Engage the Friends of the Chicago Portage and National Park Service to determine whether there is opportunity to create a central hub of information - a landing site - for the Portage Site that is referenced by all other web pages. Determine who will be responsible for hosting and updating information on this website. Determine what other entities, such as public libraries, are currently linking to online information about the Portage.

**Immediate Action:** Reach out to navigation services such as Google Maps to clarify the location of the “Chicago Portage” search term. Begin by reporting the issue to Google online, following up if the problem is slow to be fixed.

**Short Term:** Work with FPCC communications team to supply and regularly update all content and information needed for the completed web page design to the web host.



An incorrect Google Maps search might lead the visitor to a location 7 miles away from the actual Chicago Portage Site.

# GETTING THERE

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4 **WORK WITH IDOT TO DETERMINE FEASIBILITY OF DEDICATED LEFT TURN LANE INTO PORTAGE SITE FROM HARLEM AVENUE NORTHBOUND**

Feedback from the stakeholder group indicated that the vehicular safety of entering the site from Harlem Avenue was questionable, specifically traveling in the northbound direction. Currently there is no dedicated turn lane, center lane, or signaled intersection in this location that would facilitate safe entry.

**! Immediate Action:** Engage IDOT in discussions regarding providing a dedicated northbound left turn lane into the site on Harlem Avenue, along with any other opportunities to improve vehicular safety in entering the site from the northbound direction.

### 5 **ADD ON-TRAIL LOCATION MAPS AND DIRECTIONAL SIGNAGE AT KEY POINTS ALONG THE SALT CREEK GREENWAY**

Feedback from the Charrette indicated that while cyclists frequently enjoyed using the Salt Creek Greenway, which begins at the Portage Site, they also felt occasionally lost while on the trail. Location maps and directional signage, specifically for the points at which the Greenway changes from on-street to off-street or vice versa, would help with trail connectivity and bring more cyclists into the Portage Site from adjacent communities.

**! Immediate Action:** Work with Friends of the Chicago Portage and other stakeholders to perform informal surveys of cyclists using the Salt Creek Greenway to determine if there is a significant issue with wayfinding on the Salt Creek Greenway. Consult with adjacent communities regarding any issue related to wayfinding along the Greenway.

**Long Term:** Work with FPCC staff to determine any additional opportunities for wayfinding along the Salt Creek Greenway within the Portage Site, as a terminus for the trail.

### 6 **WORK WITH NEIGHBORING MUNICIPALITIES TO DETERMINE THE PORTAGE SITE'S ROLE IN CONNECTING THE CENTENNIAL TRAIL TO THE SALT CREEK GREENWAY TRAIL**

Apart from acting as a terminus or trailhead for the Salt Creek Greenway, the Portage Site could welcome more greenway users on foot and bike if the site served as a connector for multiple regional trails, such as the Centennial Trail and the Salt Creek Greenway. The Forest Preserves should investigate using the Portage Site as a potential connector between these two regional trails and as a critical link from the Portage Site to the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Area.

**! Immediate Action:** Work with adjacent communities and external organizations, such as The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), to identify potential future connections to the Centennial Trail. Investigate the current status of the Centennial Trail connectors and extensions along the Sanitary and Ship Canal.

## 7 ADD THE PORTAGE SITE TO THE DES PLAINES RIVER PADDLING TRAIL BY CREATING A CANOE LANDING AND SIGNAGE AT THE RIVER EDGE

The Portage Site's historical significance is due in great part to its specific location at a bend in the Des Plaines River. The Portage story, however, is not currently being told on the site anywhere with the Des Plaines River in view. There is an opportunity to highlight this part of the story through the recreational activity of paddling the Des Plaines.

**! Immediate Action:** Consult with MWRD, the land owner, the requirements for making physical improvements to the river edge site. Discuss opportunities for paddling trips led by Friends of the Chicago River or Openlands to envision the potential of a canoe landing at the Portage Site. Consult with NPS representatives on possibilities for partnership in implementation. Research potential grant opportunities through the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

**! Immediate Action:** Discuss the opportunity to maintain and enhance trails along the top of the Des Plaines River levee with MWRD, given the eminent reconstruction of the levee itself. Coordinate all plans for a canoe launch at this location with the levee construction project.

**Long Term:** Create constructed canoe landing area at the river bank, including interpretive signage at the location. Add pedestrian access to the Portage loop trails.

**7b Short Term:** Discuss with MWRD the possibility of adding a canoe landing at Sanitary & Ship Canal river bank adjacent to Portage Site and MWRD property. This would provide a short overland connection between the Des Plaines River and the Chicago River via the Canal. Explore the possibility of a "portage path" connecting the two landings.



Potential location of canoe landing site at the Chicago Portage.



RECOMMENDATIONS MAP | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# GETTING AROUND

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1 CREATE SHORT "EASIEST ROUTE" WALKING LOOP

Currently the shortest, easiest loop within the site is a combination of concrete sidewalk and mowed lawn. With the goal of increasing usability and accessibility of the site for all ages and abilities, adding a 4' wide crushed gravel path to the mowed lawn portion.

**! Immediate Action:** Highlight the existence of a shorter walking loop through designing site signage directing visitors to the "easiest loop."

**Short Term:** Implement the addition of a crushed gravel portion of the mowed lawn trail. Ensure the pathway meets ADA accessibility standards.

### 2 ADD PATHWAY IN OTTAWA WOODS TO COMPLETE PARKING CONNECTION

The simplest option for increasing parking capacity to the Portage Site is utilizing existing parking lots at Ottawa Woods, located just to the north. Currently, however, there is no pedestrian connection between Ottawa Woods and the Portage Site. By creating a paved pathway from parking lots at Ottawa Woods to the intersection of 47th Street and Harlem Avenue, pedestrians can easily and safely access the Portage Site from the adjacent site.

**! Immediate Action:** Engage IDOT in discussions regarding adding a crosswalk and curb ramp at 47th Street and Harlem Avenue, from the northwest to southwest corner of the intersection. Without this crosswalk and curb ramp, pedestrian access can only safely occur by crossing the intersection on the north, east and south sides.

**Long Term:** Include a paved pathway in plans to add a crosswalk and curb ramp to the intersection. The paved pathway would stretch from the furthest south parking area within Ottawa Woods to the northwest corner of the road intersection.

### 3 IMPROVE UNPAVED TRAILS WITHIN THE SITE

The walking trails looping around the Portage Site are frequently cited as a reason people love the place. They provide an opportunity to become immersed in nature in the heart of the city. There are opportunities, however, to improve these trails and ensure they deliver a great experience for all park users in the future.

**! Immediate Action:** Ascertain impacts to the loop trail system from the levee reconstruction project, including any temporary closures or alterations to the trail while the levee project is under construction.

**Short Term:** Level and widen the gravel loop trail around the site to 5 foot clear width.

**Long Term:** Add benches at select locations along the path where groups might naturally stop or gather.

# EXPERIENCING THE PORTAGE STORY

1



The Chicago00 Project, an “award-winning partnership between the Chicago History Museum and filmmaker Geoffrey Alan Rhodes,” is an immersive digital experience that connects the user to Chicago history through site-specific historic photography overlays and descriptions. Above: The Eastland Disaster.



Wearable Augmented Reality for Cultural Sites, via a product called ARtGlass. Augmented reality could be used in concert with a guided tour program, or used in the eventual case that the site has permanent staff to distribute the devices through a visitor or interpretive center.

## 1 EXPAND SITE STORYTELLING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

**! Immediate Action:** Consult with organizations that have effectively integrated site storytelling mechanisms into the visitor experience through smartphones and digital media. Explore any opportunities to partner with local organizations and stakeholders such as the Chicago History Museum or the National Park Service. Work with the Friends of the Chicago Portage, who have crafted an engaging site tour over many years, to help create the digital story. Determine roles and responsibilities for the curation and operation of the digital media. Ensure that the interpretation of the site isn't limited to those with an access to a smartphone; this recommendation should be paired with Recommendation #4 - "Increase Interpretive Signage on Loop Trails."

**Short Term:** After a specific media and means of delivery for digital storytelling is determined, ensure that visitors to the site know that the digital experience is available. Each existing interpretive element throughout the site should also include an opportunity to engage via smartphone.

## 2 ADD PORTAGE SITE STATUE TO CHICAGO'S "STATUE STORIES" PROGRAM

Chicago's Statue Stories program, developed by the Chicago Park District and the City of Chicago, is a self-guided audio tour of Chicago as told by iconic statues throughout the city. Visitors swipe a code at the statue and voices from the production group Sing London tell stories about the statue or the place. This program, though scheduled to run only through 2020, is a perfect fit for bringing the Portage Site to life as one of Chicago's most important historic sites.

**! Immediate Action:** Contact the Statue Stories program to determine if there is the possibility of adding the Portage Site Statue to the program and understand the requirements for signage. Work with Friends of the Chicago Portage tour guides to craft the audio script.

**Short Term:** Determine if there is an opportunity to host the audio program for the Portage Statue audio online after the Statue Stories program ends in 2020.

**Long term:** Host the Portage Statue audio story online, giving every visitor a chance to understand the significance of the site.



# EXPERIENCING THE PORTAGE STORY

## 3 REDESIGN SITE ENTRY TO INVITE VISITORS AND IDENTIFY THE PORTAGE SITE AS A UNIQUE PLACE WITHIN THE FOREST PRESERVES

Distinguishing the Portage Site as a unique place within the Forest Preserves, and causing passing commuters to take notice, is only possible if the site's 'curb appeal' is strengthened. The timeless natural beauty of the site's interior should be made apparent through a new planting design toward the site entry. Turf grass should be limited to reduce maintenance and irrigation costs.

**! Immediate Action:** Clarify entry signage by updating the FPCC entry sign to the current standard. Entry gate locking systems, whether the cable lock or metal gate, should be used to lock the site on a regular basis.

**Long Term:** Replace unutilized lawn at the site entry (see below) with no-mow native grasses and perennial plants that bring the significant natural beauty of the site interior out to the site entry, while reducing continual maintenance costs. Planting should follow FPCC seed policy recommendations for Green Infrastructure.



Multiple entry signs clutter the site entrance and confuse the message.

## 4 INCREASE INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE ON LOOP TRAILS

With the recently completed interpretive signage and pavilion at the site entry area, interpretation of the site has been greatly improved. Continue this momentum and enrich the experience of visitors walking on the loop trails throughout the site by adding interpretive signage to those areas. The story of the Portage should not be diminished the further one walks into the site.

**! Immediate Action:** Work with the Friends of the Chicago Portage and other stakeholders to determine appropriate locations and messages for the next phase of interpretive signage.

**Short Term:** Work to remove and replace existing signs that show significant damage, wear or outdated information.

## 5 CREATE NATURE PLAY OPPORTUNITY

The Portage Story is one that should be enjoyed by visitors of all ages, including families with young children. By creating a nature play area or trail at the site, children can learn more about the story of the Portage by interacting with their natural surroundings. For example, with a little bit of imagination a hollowed-out log becomes a giant wooden canoe and a stick is a paddle.

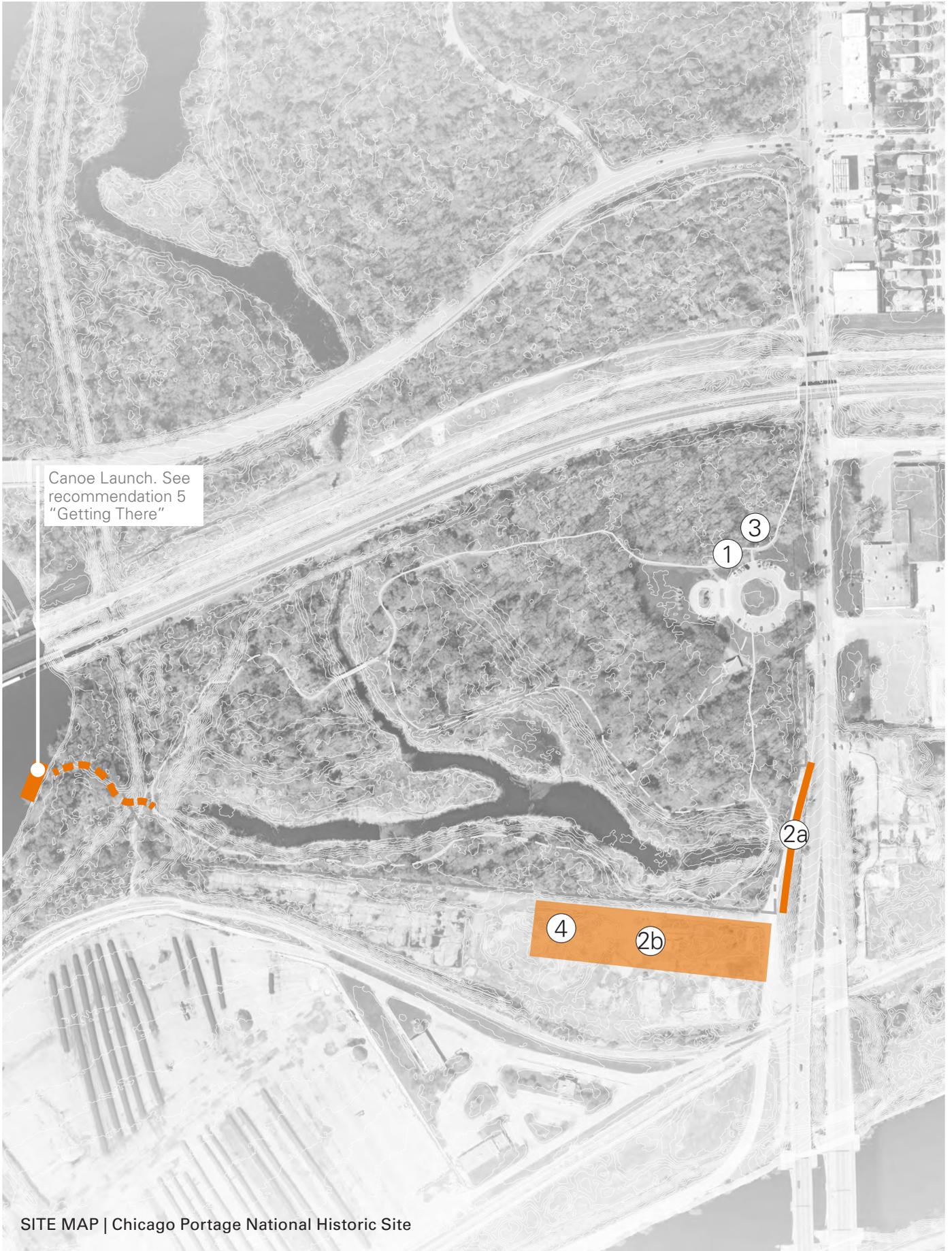
**! Immediate Action:** Consult with the Forest Preserve Nature Play Guidelines document to determine the appropriate area and type of nature play for the Portage Site.



## 6 FURTHER STUDY: ESTABLISH BASELINE OF USER VISITATION

Establishing a baseline number for user visitation can help the Forest Preserves understand existing site visitation better than anecdotal evidence of single point-in-time head counts. Establishing this baseline is an important step in determining the effect of changing any of the site's programs, amenities, or marketing efforts that are recommended in this document, as well as support future grant applications.

**! Immediate Action:** Conduct traffic counts and license plate survey for vehicles entering and exiting the Portage Site parking lot, as well as for bicycles along the Salt Creek Greenway entering or exiting the site. These counts should be taken, at a minimum, at times of peak activity, and at low activity, such as on a summer Saturday and a winter weekday. Perform visitor intercept surveys and online surveys with standardized questions to understand visitor behavior.



Canoe Launch. See recommendation 5 "Getting There"

SITE MAP | Chicago Portage National Historic Site

# SPENDING TIME THERE

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1 UPGRADE RESTROOM FACILITIES

A frequent response to questions about improving the Portage Site is to upgrade the restrooms. Currently there are no permanent restrooms, only a single freestanding portable toilet. Providing visitors with comfortable and secure restroom facilities will be required if the site is to be a signature attraction for the Forest Preserves and a destination site within the Chicago region.

**! Immediate Action:** Make the portable toilet facility accessible for all visitors by replacing it with a unit accessible for those using mobility devices such as wheelchairs. This unit will also be more spacious in the interior, providing a higher level of comfort for all users.

**Short term:** Provide permanent screened enclosure for portable toilets to enhance privacy and security. Increase the number of portable toilets to two.

**Long Term:** Construct permanent comfort station with at least one gender-neutral accessible restroom and drinking water fountain.

### 2 PROVIDE ADDITIONAL PARKING CAPACITY AT OR NEAR THE SITE

During some special events, the main parking lot at the Portage Site fills up completely. Though most of the time parking is sufficient, with increased visitation it will become important to provide additional options to those arriving by car. Because concerns have been expressed about increasing the amount of parking within a relatively small site, it is recommended to explore options for parking outside of the current Portage Site boundaries.

**! 2a Immediate Action:** In addition to recommendations for expanded parking access in Ottawa Woods (see Site Access recommendation 3), discussions should be held with MWRD regarding the possibility of allowing parking along the Portage Trail Road for special events at specific times, not to interfere with through traffic or truck traffic.

**2b Short term:** When weekly parking needs justify increasing capacity, coordinate with MWRD on using the MWRD property on an as-needed basis for parking only, without improvement to the property (mowing/brush clearing only). Pedestrian walk zones should be indicated along Portage Trail Road where there are conflicts with vehicular circulation.

**Long Term:** If the MWRD property is improved with a visitor center or other permanent facility, it will be necessary to provide an improved or paved parking at the site.

### 3 INSTALL BICYCLE RACKS NEAR THE ENTRANCE TO THE SALT CREEK GREENWAY

As the southern terminus of the Salt Creek Greenway, many of the visitors to the site experience the site and trail via bicycle. Installing bicycle racks would encourage visitors who arrive by bicycle to stay for a longer period of time and project the message that the Forest Preserves are bike-friendly places.

# SPENDING TIME THERE

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4 PROVIDE A PORTAGE VISITOR CENTER OR INTERPRETIVE CENTER

While providing a permanent facility, such as an interpretive center or visitor center, is a worthwhile goal for any National Historic Site that regularly receives a large number of visitors, it's essential to understand the requisite funding, staffing, operations, and maintenance impacts that having a permanent center creates. Such a structure will also help to improve the site's prominence and attract more visitors.

**Short Term:** Conduct a market study to understand the need for a physical visitor facility at the Portage Site. Work with MWRD to determine the potential for leasing the south parcel for an improved structure in the future. Determine warrants and critical decision-making factors for a visitor center and engage potential partners in discussion on operating the center in partnership, such as the Chicago History Museum, Canal Corridor Association, or private partners.

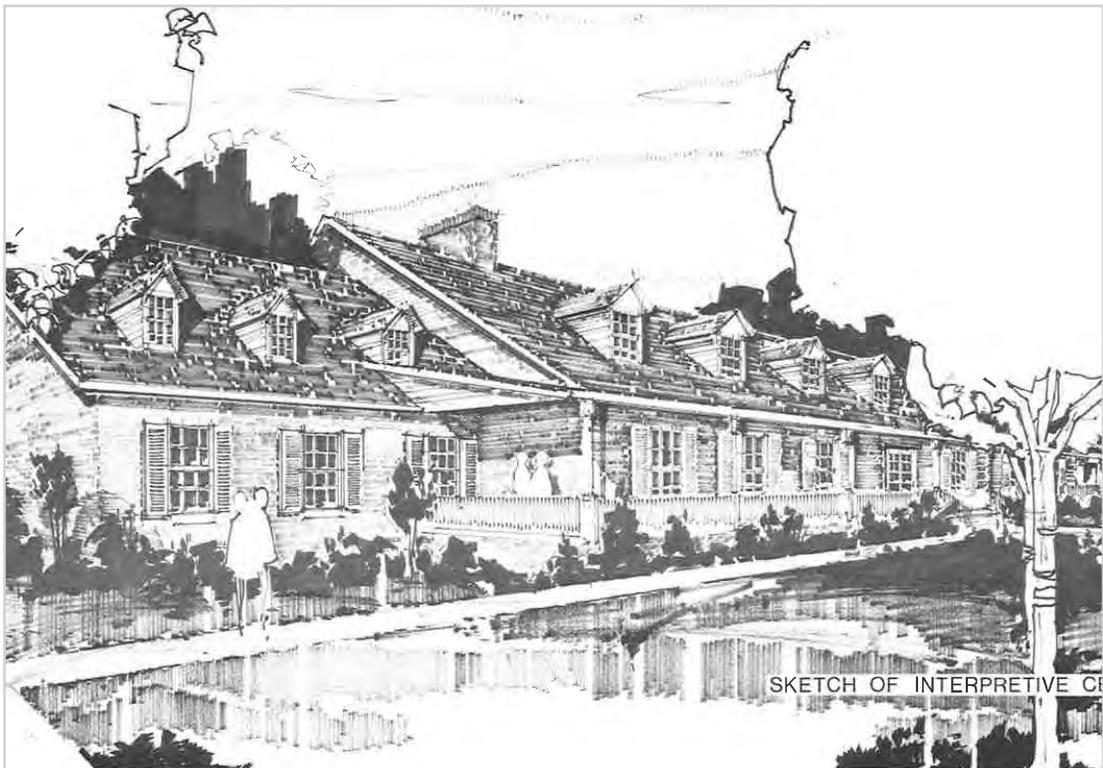


Illustration of Interpretive Center as proposed in the 1975 Design Study

# ENHANCING OPERATIONS

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **! 1 EXPLORE POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR FUNDING AND PROGRAMMING**

Create a short list of organizations and individuals for possible partnership and funding opportunities.

Determine the long-term role of FPCC staff for fundraising and management of donations.

Target future donations and partnerships to specific items in the Master Plan or ongoing maintenance activities.

### **! 2 FORMALIZE PROGRAMMING/EVENTS CALENDAR AND SITE MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES**

Centralize the distribution of information via a programming or events calendar hosted on the primary Portage Site web page.

Formalize process for volunteer groups such as the Friends of the Chicago Portage and Friends of the Forest Preserves to schedule events, so that all site activities are coordinated and understood.

### **! 3 RE-ENGAGE WITH THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE TO DISCUSS RELATIONSHIP TO PORTAGE SITE**

As an affiliate site of the National Park System, the Portage Site has an unclear relationship to NPS. Currently there is no involvement by NPS in the management, programming, or promotion of the site despite its National Historic designation. Discuss with NPS if there is an opportunity for further involvement with the site.

### **! 4 DETERMINE PRIORITY FOR MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS**

Through discussions with stakeholder groups, determine the priority list for implementation of Master Plan recommendations. The priority list should be time-based and specific, beginning with "immediate" recommendations. Determine the parties responsible for managing and implementing each recommendation item.

