



Sauk-Calumet Group

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The Little Calumet River Underground Railroad Project

by Dorelle Ackermann

When I first heard there were stops on the Underground Railroad right here in the southern suburbs, I knew I wanted to experience it firsthand. So, I joined their Facebook group and signed up for a tour on Saturday Nov. 18, 2022. The day was bone chilling cold, but we had a full bus of enthusiastic participants and a considerate historian and guide who modified the trip by sharing much of his talk on the bus rather than at the stops along the way. The tour began at the Beaubien Woods Forest Preserve which will hopefully be the start of a 3/4 mile “Freedom Trail” where visitors can walk along the Little Calumet River to the Ton Farm. The forest preserve is a beautiful open space along the river, but across the river you can see one of two landfills in the community that reminds you that this area has had its share of environmental injustices. With that in mind, we drove a short distance to the community of Altgeld Gardens. Altgeld Gardens was built in 1943 to house black workers during the war, and it was designed as a garden city with 2 story row houses, curved streets and green space.

Altgeld Gardens is also the home of the “Mother of the Environmental Movement,” Hazel Johnson, whose daughter is still an activist living in the community. The area is referred to as the “toxic donut” because it is surrounded by two landfills, a water treatment sewage retention pond, heavy industry and railroads. It is a forgotten section of Chicago. Barack Obama spent a year in the area as a



Photo Source: Powershift.org

community organizer in

1989. Our next stop was the Indiana Avenue bridge where Freedom Seekers crossed the Calumet River by ferry or bridge. At this point, I would like to point out the use of the term “freedom seekers” instead of “fugitive slaves” as the term is more affirming, and words can have impacts both negative and positive. What made this tour something I was motivated to write about in this newsletter was Larry McClellan’s stories about individual freedom seekers and his ability to express this important history in a way that we could somehow feel the freedom seekers’ emotions. So, when he told us we would be walking on holy ground, we had a sense of the hope, courage and fears that must have been felt by the 500 - 800 people that crossed this very spot. We also understood on this cold day why the vast majority of freedom seekers timed their journey for spring.



Photo by Dorelle Ackermann

Of the 40,000 to 50,000 freedom seekers escaping the south, 3,000 to 4500 traveled through the Chicago area on their way to Detroit and eventually Canada. They chose this route for 2 main reasons. Chicago was known as a sanctuary city (sound familiar?), and in addition, Illinois was bordered by the union slave states, Missouri and Kentucky. However, bounty hunting slave chasers also saw Chicago as a place to look for runaway slaves, and the fugitive slave laws of 1850 made it risky for freedom seekers to make Chicago their home. It's a sad irony that these men, women and children had to escape the "land of the free" to be free. The next stop brought us to the Ton farm which sits off 134th street, the only dirt road in Chicago (did we mention environmental justice is still an issue?). The Ton farm was a stop on the Underground Railroad because the Tons, immigrants from Holland, spoke English and could best shelter and direct the freedom seekers. They and others risked fines of \$15,000 (today's dollars) for helping fugitive slaves, but they did it none the less. In 1950 the Ton farm became a black owned marina to serve black boaters in a still segregated Chicagoland. It was personally upsetting to me just last year seeing a motorboat on the Calumet River at Beaubien



Photo by Dorelle Ackermann

woods sporting a Confederate flag and "Trump 2020" flag. I'm afraid a large number of Americans are still Freedom Seekers. The marina was purchased in 2005 by Ronald Gaines who is redeveloping the marina and working with "Openlands" to develop the "African American heritage water trail" which will allow canoeists and kayakers to travel 7 miles upstream to the town of Robbins, which was the first community of color, founded in 1917. I want to thank Tom Shepherd and Larry McClellan for their continuing work to lead these tours as well as Lana Lewis, who is a member of the South Holland Master Chorale, for sharing her beautiful voice in leading us in "Wade Through the Waters" as we stood at the Ton farm remembering those who sought freedom.

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2021-2022: Progress? Absolutely!

by Lois Lauer

I've heard both friends and voices in the media say that our government is broken, our democracy is going down. Really? I don't think so. I see lots of reasons to be hopeful. The 117th Congress (2021-2022) has proved to be one of the most productive 2 years in history. Major legislation was passed and signed into law: The American Rescue Plan to combat COVID and boost the economy, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Package to rebuild bridges and roads, the PACT Act to support military personnel exposed to toxic burn bits, the CHIPS Act to strengthen American microchip

manufacturing , the Violence Against Women Act, the Respect for Marriage Act, the electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Act, the Bipartisan Safer communities Act to curb gun violence, and in a huge win for the environment, the Inflation Reduction Act with the largest-ever US investment for fighting climate change, with the goal of reducing greenhouse gases by 40%, by 2030! President Biden signed all these into law, promoted more progressive measures with Presidential Orders, rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement, and reestablished our alliances and leadership in the global community. On top of all that good news, the Illinois legislature has been leading the nation with legislation in the last few years focused on women’s rights, environmental justice, gun safety, and clean energy! The results of these efforts are starting to show up in our communities with electric school buses, solar energy opportunities, job growth, less unemployment, new bridges, and so much more. I feel all these give us great reasons to be hopeful. Are there still huge problems of injustice, inequality, crime, environmental degradation, and climate change? Absolutely. But are we making progress? Absolutely, absolutely! Thanks to all of you who have supported this progress with your votes, your activism, and your lifestyle choices.

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

by Sierra Club Illinois Water Team

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources recently reopened the [Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program \(CREP\)](#). The CREP program is a partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture and the State of Illinois to “retire frequently flooded and environmentally sensitive cropland in order to achieve restoration and long-term protection of those areas.”

The CREP program allows landowners to voluntarily implement conservation measures on land that has been recently cropped in the Illinois or Kaskaskia River watersheds, and meets at least one of the following criteria:

- Is in the 100-year floodplain.
- Qualifies as wetlands, wetlands farmed under natural conditions, or prior converted wetlands.
- Is highly erodible land (HEL) with an erodibility index of 8 or greater adjacent to the 100-year floodplain.

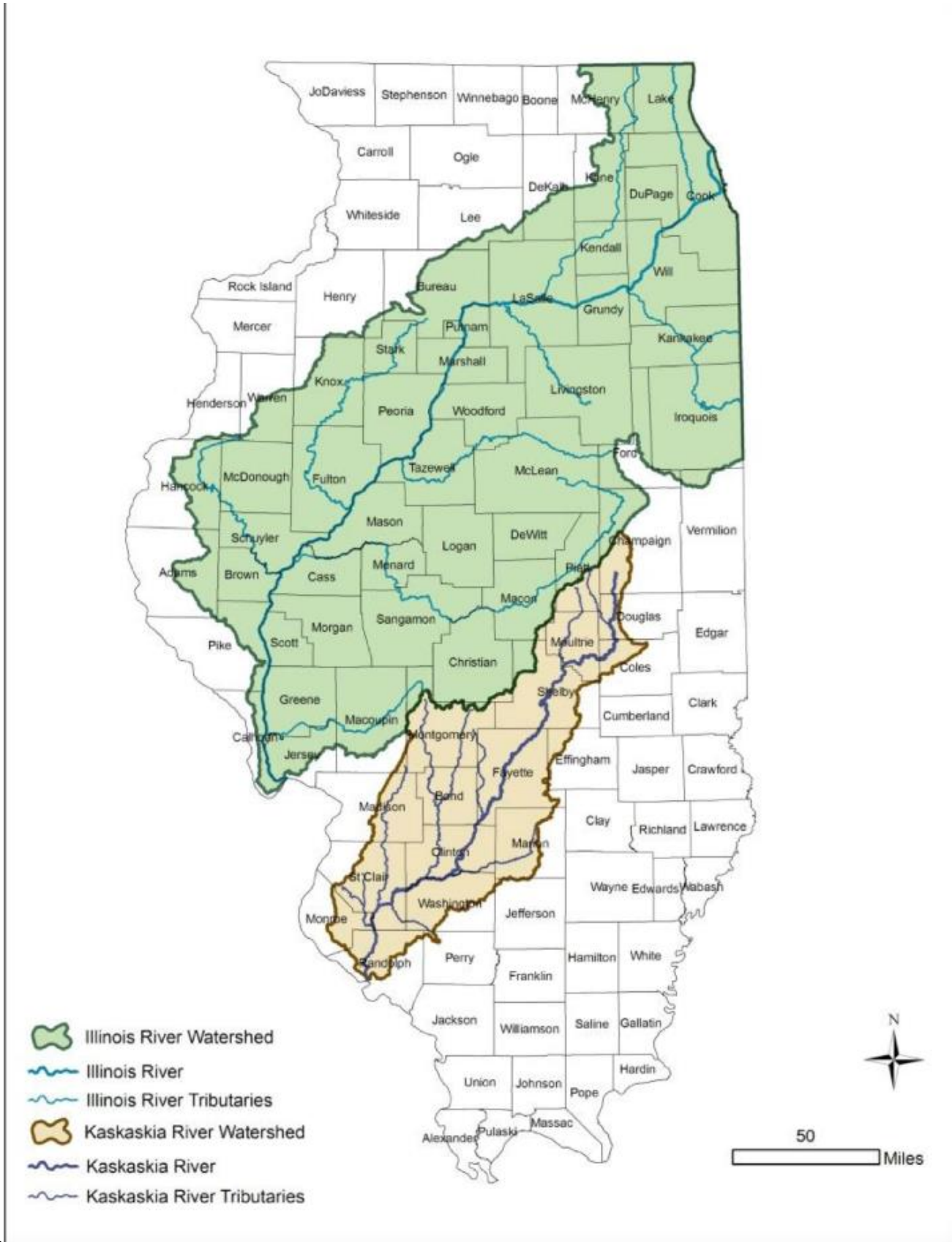
Landowners interested in implementing conservation practices can receive technical assistance from their local USDA Service Center and local Soil and Water Conservation District. These local agencies can provide help and technical assistance designing conservation practices to reduce nutrient pollution and create habitat for wildlife. Sierra Club Illinois encourages all landowners in the Illinois and Kaskaskia watersheds to consider reaching out to their County USDA office to learn more about these programs. ([Here is the list of Illinois SWCDs.](#))

Tharran Hobson, Shawnee Group Sierra Club member, had a very good experience with signing some of his farmland in Brown County into the Conservation Enhancement Program almost 20 years ago:

“I own 160 acres and 20 acres of the farm was in a creek bottom tributary of the Illinois River. The first 5 years I owned the property the creek flooded out the crop in 3 of those years. Being a conservationist, I heard about the CREP program through the NRCS and applied. My restoration prescription was tree plantings, so it made sense to do a permanent easement. Permanent easements also carry the highest up-front payment and annual rental payment. This area is now one of my favorite spots on the farm. The

program also allows a small percentage to be planted to wildlife food plots. The deer and turkey love this new habitat, and so do I.”

Map by State of Illinois of land eligible for CREP



Here

BID FOR ICONIC ‘GREENWAY’ IN CENTRAL LAKE COUNTY ADVANCES

State Task Force Endorses Proposal for “Crown Jewel” Nature Trail and Conservation Area in Recommendation to Legislature

A proposal to transform existing open space into a scenic nature trail and conservation area in Central Lake County – something advocates have described as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to preserve one of the region’s environmental crown jewels – took a critical step forward Friday when a state task force embraced the concept.

By a nearly unanimous vote, the Illinois Route 53 Land Expansion Alternative Task Force – a panel created by the state legislature to study future options for the property – adopted a resolution recommending that Illinois Department of Transportation transfer ownership of parcels that would comprise a large portion of the proposed Greenway to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Jack Darin, Sierra Club Illinois Chapter Director said, “This recommendation is a major step toward a fantastic new amenity for Lake County communities that will offer healthy outdoor experiences, flood protection from increasing storms, and better quality of life for residents.”

IDOT possesses those parcels as a legacy of its erstwhile studies of the long-controversial and now-defunct proposal to extend Route 53 from Lake-Cook Road to Route 120. Today, they remain flourishing open space that brims with emerald groves, sun-gilded ponds and streams, and glimpse of treasured wild habitat. They also comprise a large share of the terrain proposed for the nature trail and surrounding conservation area.

That recommended transfer would entrust their stewardship to IDNR, as the first step toward developing a plan for the trail.

Barbara Klipp, Executive Director of Midwest Sustainability Group said that “Protecting these incredibly important open spaces is a huge step forward for the good people of Lake County. If we learned anything during the pandemic, it is how vital connections to nature are for our health and wellbeing. Thank you so much to Senator Bush for spearheading this effort and I am grateful for the bi-partisan support we received. We look forward to working together with the local communities, IDNR and the state on the next steps of turning this regionally significant area into a protected resource for all to enjoy.”

After decades of recurring studies of that project – each one crumbling politically amid vociferous local opposition and financially due its astronomical price tag – the Illinois Tollway finally abandoned the concept in 2019. Its demise led to the advent of the Task Force, which was established by the Illinois General Assembly to review alternative uses for the land. Of the 19 Task Force members, 16 voted in favor of the proposed resolution. The Village of Mundelein was the lone dissenting vote. IDOT voted present and Visit Lake County abstained.

The resolution documenting the task force recommendation will be submitted to the Illinois General Assembly, which will have the opportunity to vote on the proposal.

Here is another Environmental Victory Press Release from the Association for the Wolf Lake Initiative

TO: AWLI members and friends,

We won. Last year the Association for the Wolf Lake Initiative (AWLI), a bi-state, not-for-profit organization and land trust seeking to protect and enhance the Wolf Lake watershed, asked state, county, and city officials and individuals to oppose the issuance of a permit that would allow Wolf Lake Terminals to continue to discharge industrial stormwater into Wolf Lake. This directly affects William W. Powers State Recreation Area located in Chicago. Moreover, the waters of Wolf Lake flow into Lake Michigan, the source of Chicago's drinking water and that of residents of Northwest Indiana. We took the issue to court...**and won.**

So now Wolf Lake Terminals must once again ask the state of Indiana to renew its permit. We don't know exactly when it will apply, but if you wish to keep updated, let me know. For more information <https://www.wolflakeinitiative.org/>

Thanks. *Michael L. Boos*

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Martin Luther King Day of Service 2023

By Dorelle Ackermann



What could make hauling wood in 100% rain and 15 mph winds a fun event? Well, how about the knowledge that you are joining others in honoring Dr. King's legacy with a few hours of service to your community. Lots of events occurring on this holiday and I would encourage you to seek out one that appeals to you. Spending time in a local forest preserve is what appealed to me, although I was surprised it was not cancelled due to the weather. Then again, my fellow volunteers were a hardy group and dressed for the weather. Thank you, Karey O'Brien of the Will County Forest Preserve for organizing both a litter clean up and brush removal event at Rock Run Preserve on

Monday Jan 16th, 2023. It was so inspiring to work along with the preserve's stewards who do this work regularly as well as seeing volunteers of all ages and genders getting the work done. Despite the rain there were dozens of volunteers working along the trail. I chose the brush cleanup which included the stewards using chain saws to cut down invasive buck weed while the volunteers hauled the cuttings to the location of the prescribed burn. Since the stewards work all year long, and sometimes conditions are not conducive for a prescribed burn, I and 4 others were assigned to moving previously stacked branches to the fire which was tended by another steward. We moved three stacks while

another group cleaned up the wood being cut in real time. These stewards take their job seriously and separated some branches that had nice fungi growing to allow them to thrive. And the reason we were hauling wood piles was so that we wouldn't leave additional fire scars and to protect any creatures that might have decided to lodge within the wood piles. After the buckweed was cut down, a volunteer carefully sprayed herbicide on the cut stems to prevent the buckweed from regrowing. Later, native seed would be spread throughout the cut area. Next spring, when you are enjoying cycling on the paved bike path at Rock Run, know that the native species are returning because of the work of volunteers. You don't have to wait until next MLK's birthday to volunteer and/or enjoy nature at your local forest preserve. You can go to reconnectwithnature.org and sign up for their Compass newsletter. I found 40 events for the month of February, and I would guarantee you will find something to fit your interests and activity level.



3 Little Things

by Portia Gallegos

Like most of us, I try to live a greener life and conserve resources. Sometimes it can be overwhelming to try new activities. However, I believe in the power of small changes, so last year I started doing three simple things to be greener. I've listed mine below. What are 2 or 3 or 4 simple things you do to protect our environment? Please feel free to share them on our [Facebook page](#), or email them to [newsletter editor Gregg Ott](#) for our next newsletter.

1) I feel guilty when I throw out food, especially leftovers. This year, I put cheerful stickers on two of our refrigerator shelves, and those are the "leftover" shelves. Our family knows to eat whatever's on those shelves for lunch or snacks ASAP, and now I almost never throw out leftovers.

2) I tend to wear my clothes until they have multiple stains or rips, and Goodwill can't sell clothes in that condition. H&M, the international clothing store, does run an active textile recycling program. If you bring them a bag or two or three of your clean textiles, they will recycle them and give you a 15% off coupon for your next purchases. Every once in a while, I need to buy something new, and I like H&M's organic cotton clothing. For more info, check <https://hmgroup.com/sustainability/circularity-and-climate/recycling/>.

3) I get text alerts from Citizen's Climate Lobby to call my legislators once/ month about environmental legislation. Sure, I work full-time, but I've got time for 1-3 calls a month on my lunch break. Their website is at <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/>

None of these actions take much time, and I'm happier because of them. What are your three things? I want to know, so I can add them to my list. Happy 2023!

Sauk Calumet Sierra Club Group Meetings Schedule

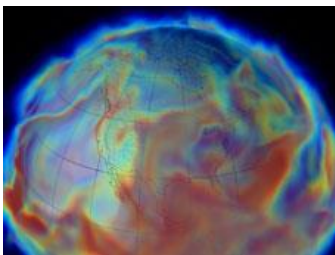
All Sierra Club meetings take place on the 2nd Monday of the month except for June, July and August. We are meeting via Zoom. Meetings start at 7:15 pm with introductions, followed by announcements and our main presentation. To register and get your Zoom link, go to our Webpage, <https://www.sierraclub.org/illinois/sauk-calumet>, scroll down to the calendar, and click on the presentation you want. All meetings are free and open both to Sierra Club members and to the public. We will send details by email about those programs when the programs are confirmed, and they will also be listed on the [Sauk Calumet Sierra Club website](#) and [Sauk Calumet Group Facebook page](#).



February 13 - PFAS - Nicole Saulsberry, Sierra Club's Springfield representative, has already helped pass two Illinois laws that limit our exposure to PFAS chemicals. PFAS chemicals, known as the "forever chemicals", were used to make Teflon and stain resistant fabric, along with many other products. They take a long time to break down in the environment and are linked to several types of cancer and health problems. Nicole is going to talk to us about PFAS's and ways we can fight to get them out of our communities and lives.



March 13- Sustainability - Maria Anna Rafac, Joliet Junior College's Sustainability Coordinator, is going to talk to us about sustainability. JJC boasts several LEED certified buildings, an array of 3,542 solar panels, sustainability classes and student organizations, along with working to conserve natural areas on campus. Learn more about how to be more sustainable.



April 10 - Climate Simulations - Andy Panelli, a citizen leader of Citizen's Climate Education, will use a top-notch climate simulator developed at MIT in an interactive presentation about the most impactful actions we can take to fight climate change. Feel free to bring your ideas for climate action to the meeting!



May 8 - Sandhill Cranes - Join long-time Sierra Club member Jean Catania to learn more about these beautiful birds.

Letters to the Editor:

Letters on content within the Sauk-Calumet newsletter should be sent to the editor at:

sc-editor@illinois.sierraclub.org

Please include your full name and address and reference the article on which you are commenting.

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The Sierra Club from the national level down to the local groups does so many positive things to help protect our planet. So, let's get outdoors and enjoy our beautiful world together. Click below for Sierra Club Illinois outings.



Remember to check our Sauk-Calumet Group website for current information and news updates on issues relevant to Illinois.

[Click here for our website.](#)

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