

Promoting Tourism to Support Coastal Economies in Illinois' Northernmost Communities

Proposal for the 2017-2019 NOAA Coastal Management Fellowship

Submitted by
Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Coastal Management Program
160 N LaSalle St Suite S703
Chicago IL 60601

October 14, 2016



Diane Tecic
Director, Coastal Management Program
P: 312-814-0665
Email: Diane.Tecic@Illinois.gov

Background & Introduction

Illinois' northern coast, which spans from the northern reaches of Chicago to the Wisconsin state line, is home to communities that are both economically and demographically diverse. The northernmost communities (City of Zion, Village of Beach Park, and Village of Winthrop Harbor) have faced challenges with both the economy and with building a cohesive identity. The area's shared lakefront offers a critical opportunity to establish a stronger sense of place and to generate economic growth through coastal tourism. A strong, unified identity that connects these communities with one of their most important economic assets, the lakefront, is critical to fostering sustainable development and a coastal tourism industry in this region.

Located along Illinois' northern lakefront, the Adeline Jay Geo-Karis Illinois Beach State Park can play a key role in enhancing coastal tourism in the region. Illinois Beach State Park borders the communities of Zion, Beach Park, and Winthrop Harbor, and is owned and managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The park contains rare panne and coastal wetland habitats and supports more than 650 plant species and 300 species of animals. The park is, for many communities the nearest free public access point to Lake Michigan. While the park is estimated to host more than a million visitors annually, there has not been a recent effort at the state level to quantify the visitorship, patterns of use, and economic value of this particular state park to the local economy.

To realize the full potential of this important ecological and economic resource, there is a need to develop cohesive and strategic recommendations for the park with input from the surrounding communities that promote creative communication strategies, outline recommended management actions, and are responsive to identified community needs. This would set clear priorities for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Coastal Management Program and would complement other program efforts in the region to enhance coastal wayfinding, public access, and balanced use. This would also strengthen the park's role as a hub for a growing coastal tourism industry.

The Coastal Management Fellow would assess community and visitor needs and evaluate available communication and management strategies. The fellow, with support from Coastal Management Program staff and program partners, would ultimately create a menu of options for how our program can best promote coastal tourism in Illinois Beach State Park, and the region more broadly. These recommendations will provide a clear roadmap for the Coastal Management Program and the department as a whole on communication and management-related projects and would lay the groundwork for near-term and long-term park improvements. In the second year of the project, the fellow will implement at least one of the communications strategies identified through this process, such as a public access guide to Illinois Beach State Park.

This project will build upon the Coastal Management Program's evolving work in the region. Our staff are members of the Lakefront Economic Development Group, a group currently led by Sheri Jesiel, a state congressional representatives that focuses on fostering sustainable coastal

tourism in the region and includes local elected officials and their staff from the three northernmost communities. Through this venue, the Coastal Management Program has been involved in conversations about future projects focused on connecting trails and coastal wayfinding. As a part of our 309 Enhancement Strategy, we will also be developing a public access inventory which will include Illinois Beach State Park. Detailed knowledge of park assets and public access opportunities will create a foundation for communicating the park's value, and this public access inventory will be developed concurrently with the fellowship by CMP staff. The fellowship project will also draw upon our program's expertise and work in Millennium Reserve, a public-private partnership in the southern region of Chicago. Through this partnership, we recently completed community-supported Park Enhancement Recommendations for William Powers State Recreation Area, the other Illinois Department of Natural Resources state park in our coastal region. The fellow will use the document, as well as lessons learned, as a model for moving forward.

Goals and Objectives

Goal: Enhance coastal tourism and regional identity branding in the three northernmost Illinois coastal communities (and other adjacent communities as appropriate) by strengthening outreach and communications about Illinois Beach State Park.

Objectives:

- Develop social science survey methods and implement surveys at Illinois Beach State Park to understand how visitors are using Illinois Beach State Park, as well as their needs and perceptions about the park and the region
- Develop recommendations for future projects and prioritize CMP's involvement in communication projects based on the needs, cost, ongoing or planned work of the partners, and other factors
- Implement one to three projects focused on communicating about IBSP and the region's coastal resources

Milestones and Outcomes

Outcomes of this project will include:

- An assessment that identifies current uses of the park, perceptions about the park and the region, and future needs
- Social science survey methods that can be used by CMP and IDNR at other sites
- Strategic recommendations for CMP's engagement, primarily focused on tourism
- At least one targeted communications tool/project that would raise the profile of the area

Activities and Milestones

August 1, 2017 – Dec 31, 2017

- Orientation to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Coastal Management Program

- Background research to become familiar with the region, its history, and its challenges and opportunities
- Site visits to Illinois Beach State Park and other coastal sites
- Meet partners in the Lakefront Economic Development Group
- Evaluate social science survey methods and determine most appropriate methodology
- Develop and refine survey text
- Host several focus groups to finalize survey text

Jan 1, 2018 – July 31, 2018

- Implement survey to gather data about park use, needs, and perceptions. There will most likely be a seasonal component to the survey to capture a range of park uses.
- Analyze survey data and compile findings
- Review comprehensive community plans that outline municipality visions for economic development
- Research other relevant local and county plans
- Incorporate information from survey findings and plans to develop a starting point for municipality and partner input

August 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019

- Facilitate, with the support of Coastal Management Program staff, several exercises with municipalities using social science tools (e.g. idea listing exercise) that will help prioritize actions
- Facilitate, with the support of Coastal Management Program staff, several exercises with Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff (including the Coastal Management Program) and project partners using social science tools to prioritize actions based on impact and required resources
- Share a suite of recommended communication and management actions with Coastal Management Program staff based on findings
- Select one to three of the recommended communication actions to implement, in collaboration with project partners. Fellow will develop and carry out at least one recommended project before the end of the fellowship, for example, a public access guide to Illinois Beach State Park.

July 1, 2019 – July 31, 2019

- Project wrap-up and evaluation

Throughout the Project

- Attend regular Coastal Management Program staff meetings
- Participate in meetings with our partner organizations relevant to this project, including meetings with: the Lakefront Economic Development Group, Visit Lake County, Lake County Forest Preserves, Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, and municipalities, as needed
- Attend conferences and workshops, as feasible, including the 2017 State of Lake Michigan conference and the 2018 Social Coast Forum

Project Description

The project has three key components that build upon each other. These include:

1) Illinois Beach State Park visitorship assessment

The fellow will perform an assessment of current park uses, visitor perceptions, and future needs. In collaboration with Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the Coastal Management Program, and the Visit Lake County -Illinois Convention and Visitors Bureau, the fellow will determine key information needs about park visitorship. The fellow will then develop a survey to assess park uses and visitor perceptions, taking into account a range of methods for implementation. The fellow will develop survey questions and methods with assistance from social science experts at the Prairie Research Institute, a research entity of the University of Illinois that works in close partnership with the Coastal Management Program. To further refine the survey, the fellow will host several focus groups with stakeholders to determine the clearest language and most relevant survey questions. The fellow will also determine the frequency and timing of the surveys to ensure balanced information from seasonal users. Seasonal activities, such as bird watching or hunting, may attract a different set of visitors than summer beach activities and it's important to have input from all park users. The fellow will lead collecting, compiling, and analyzing the information gathered, and sharing the information with our partners. The methodology developed for the survey could be used by the Coastal Management Program in other similar efforts, especially as we expand our work on improving public access, as outlined earlier.

2) Strategic recommendations for Coastal Management Program engagement.

There is a pressing need to understand community desires for Illinois Beach State Park and to identify and prioritize ways that IDNR and CMP can work with the communities to help them realize the vision of the park as a regional economic and tourism driver. Surrounding communities have already identified some needs and future projects in their municipal and comprehensive plans. That work involved community outreach and stakeholder engagement. We want to build upon those documents - the goal is for the work of the fellow to be complementary but not repetitive of past efforts.

Illinois Beach State Park plays an important part in fostering coastal tourism throughout the region as a whole, and the main focus of the project will be communication and management actions related to the park. Tourism is considered a major regional industry, and increasing knowledge about the assets in the region has been identified by members of the Lakefront Economic Development Group as a particular need. Illinois Beach State Park needs in other categories (infrastructure improvements, restoration efforts) will be compiled as well to serve as a guide for IDNR, but those will not be the main responsibility of the fellow. CMP staff will use the information to work with IDNR staff on assessing needs in those areas and deciding on appropriate action and further involvement of fellow.

As a first step for this component, the fellow will review municipal plans, regional transportation plan, county plan, and other relevant documents to gain an understanding of the issues and the needs. The fellow will also learn about existing tools that communities and

partners have been utilizing or are developing. The fellow will attend meetings of the Lakefront Economic Development Group. CMP staff will reach out to partners in the region to introduce the fellow and enable him/her to conduct interviews with municipal representatives and other partners like the Lake County Forest Preserves and Visit Lake County – Illinois Convention and Visitors Bureau. The fellow will compile information gathered from plans and meetings, and incorporate information gained from Illinois Beach State Park visitorship assessment and community perception surveys, to identify projects that can be undertaken by CMP and to some extent broader IDNR (with the understanding of the limitations of the agency). Special emphasis will be placed on communication and tourism projects, and also on building off of existing tools and efforts. The fellow will assess the need and feasibility of implementing identified projects, evaluating preliminary costs, effort needed, timeframes, possible partnerships and cost leveraging. Based on that information the fellow, CMP, communities, and other partners will prioritize the projects to develop final set of recommendations for CMP.

This process will foster coordination, transparency, and trust between the communities and IDNR. In the past, the communities have had issues with IDNR not being as responsive to their needs as it could be. IDNR on the other hand has faced numerous budget cuts and staff reductions, limiting the agency's ability to enact change. This process will emphasize focus on projects that are doable and realistic, and the community representatives will be directly involved in prioritizing projects that will benefit both the region and Illinois Beach State Park. The recommendations will serve as guidance for projects selected for implementation by the fellow as well as other CMP and IDNR projects.

3) Implementation of at least one recommended communications projects

The fellow will take a lead on implementing one to three of the communications recommendations identified through the engagement process. The goal for the implemented projects would be to raise the profile of the area and help revitalize its image by communicating about the assets of the park and the broader value of region. Possible tourism-related projects, based on CMP's knowledge of the needs, include access and interpretive guide, developing coastal stories and GIS story maps, and supporting Lake County's wayfinding initiative for the northernmost communities (to be started in the near future by Visit Lake County). Potential projects could also focus on expanding involvement of community residents with the park through outreach programming. Those projects could include cultivating community docents and working with and expanding Illinois Beach State Park's stewardship volunteer workgroup. The particulars of this step are broad and vague on purpose – this part will depend on the outcomes of the above-described process, effort needed to implement any of the projects, and expertise and interest of the fellow. Depending on the project, the fellow could be the main implementer, or could be supported by CMP staff or outside consultants or contractors, funded by CMP. We envision the majority of year 2 of the fellowship dedicated to project implementation, with the fellow focusing on one bigger effort, or taking on multiple small projects.

An example of a fellow project that CMP discussed funding in the past and that ties in all components discussed in this proposal is developing a public access guide to Illinois Beach State

Park. The fellow would assess the value of such a tool, and determine best format – web, printed, app – to reach the desired audience. User survey initially performed by the fellow would be instrumental in understanding who uses the park and what the communication needs are. The guide would utilize the public asset inventory developed by CMP through Section 309 work and would draw on past CMP work and partnerships, such as developing interpretive signs for the park. Depending on the fellow’s skill set, the particulars of the work, such as writing the access guide copy and laying out the document or website could be outsourced to a communications expert, with costs covered by CMP. Work would be done in coordination with Visit Lake County to be complementary to their efforts and be a component in the bigger, cohesive picture for communicating about the region. Again, this is just one example of what the fellow could work on – actual projects will be selected by the fellow with input from CMP staff and partners.

Fellow Mentoring

Suellen Burns, CMP’s community engagement and communications specialist, will serve as the fellow’s primary mentor. For over four years Suellen has been leading IDNR’s work in Millennium Reserve, a public-private partnership in the Calumet region of Illinois focused on revitalizing the economy, community, and environment of this southernmost region in our Coastal area. CMP has been a driving force in Millennium Reserve community engagement, wayfinding, and communications initiatives— providing leadership, technical expertise, and administrative support as well as funding for specific projects – since that partnership’s inception. Much of the work presented in this proposal will build on the successes of and lessons learned from IDNR’s role in Millennium Reserve.

The fellow will also work alongside CMP staff members and two CMP contracted staff members who are part of the University of Illinois’ Prairie Research Institute. These staff members work on our Section 309 Public Access priorities, lead our broader CMP communications work, and serve as community liaisons in the north coast region.

Project Partners

The nature of this project will require coordination and involvement of various partners at the state, regional, and municipal level. The fellow, with guidance and support of the mentors, will coordinate with the following:

- Coastal Management Program – will host the fellow, provide project support and mentorship, and additional financial resources to implement/initiate communications projects identified in year 1 of the fellowship. CMP will dedicate up to \$50,000 to project implementation.
- Visit Lake County – Illinois Convention and Visitors Bureau –will provide information to the fellow on current initiatives, their knowledge and expertise for moving forward with communication/outreach tools in the region. Attends Lakefront Economic Development Group meetings to discuss tourism initiatives.
- Lakefront Economic Development Group, including the Village of Winthrop Harbor, City of Zion, Village of Beach Park, and Illinois State Representative Sheri Jesiel . The group meets every two months to discuss issues, collaborate on projects, and track progress.

Members will be the fellow's main points of contact for their communities and will provide guidance and information.

- City of Waukegan - In addition to the municipalities mentioned above, the fellow will attend meetings of the City of Waukegan Waterfront Working Group with the CMP Director to learn from the successes of this adjacent community. Waukegan is in the midst of redeveloping their lakefront, which is an Area of Concern in Recovery. In 2015, CMP funded a Lakefront Active Implementation Plan for Waukegan to identify short-term projects and activities to improve and activate the city's lakefront area, stimulate economic development, preserve environmentally- and economically-valuable natural resources, and build a strong community identity.
- The Lake County Forest Preserve District will be a key partner in this project. A unit of government unique to Illinois, the Forest Preserve conserves, protects, and restores natural areas, and provides significant opportunities for passive recreation. The Lake County Forest Preserve District has a strong identity and network of resources, and owns property adjacent to IDNR's Illinois Beach State Park.

The fellow will be encouraged to utilize existing relationships between CMP and the University of Illinois Prairie Research Institute and Illinois- Indiana Sea Grant Program for any product development, and social science support. Furthermore, we hope our fellow will engage the 2016 Coastal Fellow at the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program to learn from his experience, and cross pollinate ideas between our state borders.

Cost Share

CMP will provide the required cost share of \$15,000 out of state funds. CMP will also provide the fellow with computer, office space, and necessary tools and support to successfully carry out the project. As the fellow identifies projects to implement, CMP will provide financial support for those projects out of our NOAA coastal funding.

Strategic Focus Areas

This proposal addresses elements of two strategic focus areas identified by the NOAA Office for Coastal Management for the 2017-19 Coastal Management Fellowship Program: *Vibrant and Sustainable Coastal Economies* and *Healthy Coastal Ecosystems*. This fellowship project advances these strategic areas in the following ways:

- *Vibrant and Sustainable Coastal Economies*: 1) Promote policies and practices that foster trust, transparency, predictability, and efficiency in government decision-making for coastal and ocean uses; 2) Assist coastal decision-makers in conserving active and passive recreational uses and in preparing for existing and emerging coastal and ocean uses by providing socio-economic data, information, visualizations, technical assistance, funding, and tools; and 3) Build capacity of coastal states and communities to foster ecologically sustainable economic development and activities.

The project will engage state and local leadership, three coastal communities, and Illinois Beach State Park visitors to develop a set of priority actions for communication efforts and park management recommendations that reflect a shared vision for this important resource. Nearby communities and visitors will shape Coastal Management Program initiatives to improve public access and further align Illinois Beach State Park branding and management with community needs. This project will also support broader efforts of the Visit Lake County - Illinois Convention and Visitors Bureau and local municipalities to bolster economic development throughout the region based on sustainable coastal tourism.

- *Healthy Coastal Ecosystems:* 1) Increase and enhance opportunities for the public, students, and teachers to experience, understand, and appreciate coastal resources and make informed environmental decisions.

The project will enhance the ability of the Coastal Management Program and our project partners to effectively promote and communicate the public assets at Illinois Beach State Park, and support branding the northern Illinois coast as a destination for coastal tourism.

References

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. Village of Winthrop Harbor Comprehensive Plan. 2016. (http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/documents/10180/338430/WH+Draft+Plan_Final+Draft_August+2016.pdf/ac1eb97e-6f8e-4fb8-aa2f-1e9daf53c837)

Rolf C. Campbell & Associates, Inc. Village of Beach Park Comprehensive Plan. 2008. (http://www.villageofbeachpark.com/sitemedia/documents/business/Comprehensive_Plan_Revised_2008.pdf)

Teska Associates Inc. City of Zion Comprehensive Plan Update. 2015. (http://www.cityofzion.com/departments/economic_development/2016_final_zion_comp_plan.pdf)

The Lakota Group. William Powers Park Enhancement Recommendations. 2016. (<https://williampowers2016.wordpress.com/2016/09/06/park-enhancement-recommendations-available-for-download/>)

Illinois Department of Natural Resources Coastal Management Program. Section 309 Assessment and Strategy. 2015. (<https://www.dnr.illinois.gov/cmp/Documents/Section309/ICMPSection309PlanFINAL.pdf>)