

Friends of the Chicago River



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MWRD Candidate Responses to Key Questions

Explanatory note: As a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Friends of the Chicago River is not permitted to support or oppose candidates running for office; however, we are allowed to educate voters on issues related to our mission.

As the agency responsible for stormwater management and sewage treatment in Cook County, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) has an outsized impact on water quality in the river system and the commissioners' opinions matter.

To help voters make informed decisions in the March 19 Illinois primary election, Friends of the Chicago River solicited positions from the four candidates running to fill three spots as MWRD Commissioners with six-year terms. Another candidate runs unopposed for a two year term.

Candidate responses to our questionnaire are for informational purposes and voter education only, and are listed in alphabetical order. Friends of the Chicago River is not making any endorsements or campaign contributions to any candidates who participated or did not participate in the questionnaire.

1. What is your opinion on the annual dyeing the Chicago River green on St. Patrick's Day? Should this tradition be allowed by the relevant regulatory agencies?

Commissioner Marcelino Garcia (incumbent): MWRD's work has contributed to a resurgence of healthy habitats and aquatic life. Our ecologically productive waterways have seen great improvements and MWRD must continue ensuring such protections. To do so, the MWRD does need to stay involved with the lead agencies and stakeholders. To examine this issue, we should take note that the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) has never required a pollutant discharge permit for the dyeing of the Chicago River on St. Patrick's Day. The IEPA has deemed this dye safe, but if a permit is required, it would allow for the IEPA to test and look into what is in the dye. What we don't know is the dye's impact on fish, other aquatic species, or how concentration levels of the dye can impact aquatic life at different parts of the river system. I look for guidance from partners such as Friends of the Chicago River on ways to protect wildlife, preserve the integrity of our natural resources, and it is my goal to continue promoting positive strategies and messages about our Chicago and Calumet River System.

Commissioner Daniel "Pogo" Pogorzelski (incumbent): I will follow the Illinois EPA's guidance in accordance with their laws.

President Kari Steele (incumbent): I am a fan of tradition, and certainly anything that brings attention to the Chicago River. I hope that the river can continue to be a big part of the St. Patrick's Day celebration, however I would encourage organizers to look for creative ways and new traditions that do not involve adding green dye to the river. We can celebrate the holiday, the city, and our great river without causing distress to the wildlife that live there.

Sharon Waller: NO. This is bad precedent dating back to before the Clean Water Act. We know better, so we should act better.

2. *As the District is the second largest land manager in Cook County, how do you envision the District utilizing properties that are not required to meet the District's corporate purpose?*

Commissioner Marcelino Garcia (incumbent): Land leasing at the MWRD has progressed significantly and it will continue to face a variety of scenarios. In 2021-2022, as Chair of the Real Estate Committee, I led two productive study sessions on our leasing practices. MWRD received a great deal of public input and saw several positive outcomes - one of which was including Environmental Justice protections to its leasing criteria. With this list of twenty criteria, I believe the MWRD will be even more equipped to make the right decisions on how to best utilize District properties. I recommended that MWRD update its Real Estate page with easier access to documents, information about the updated land leasing criteria, and available landholdings, aimed at benefiting everyone including municipalities, commercial and private entities, partner agencies, and community groups. Currently 80% of District land is conserved, but I have always supported complementary/additional conservation efforts that provide multi-benefit and balanced opportunities. Finally, I strongly believe in getting out there and being stewards of MWRD's property. I participate in cleanups and plan to promote Friends in their 2024 annual Chicago River Day!

Commissioner Daniel "Pogo" Pogorzelski (incumbent): It would have to be on a case by case basis as we may not need some of this land now but we may need it in the future.

President Kari Steele (incumbent): Properties that are not required for corporate purpose are available for lease, both commercially and for public recreation use. This is a big benefit for the District, as it generates income needed for operations – including flood relief programs – and also builds partnerships with local municipalities that foster the development of parks, walking trails, and natural habitats along the waterways.

Sharon Waller: MWRD should designate local authorities such as park districts to manage property within their jurisdictional boundaries to promote public safety and environmental stewardship.

3. *Would you support the District creating and staffing an executive level Natural Land Manager position with the goal of utilizing more District property to create and enhance nature-based stormwater solutions and protected open space?*

Commissioner Marcelino Garcia (incumbent): MWRD is engaging in deeper inter-departmental collaboration to ensure the best selection of projects and dedication of District property. Externally, the MWRD has pushed itself to provide support for municipalities who rely on interagency communication and resources to prioritize their environmental needs. It's a reflection of MWRD's 2021-2025 Strategic Plan to be a community asset/partner. One particular lease that stands out for me is the recently completed Alsip Boat launch. A former parking lot space converted to a boat launch, this partnership with the Chicago Region Trees Initiative not only captures stormwater runoff, reduces flooding, and safeguards the water quality of the Cal-Sag Channel, but it brought to life a dormant District landholding and significantly improved an impaired stretch of the waterway. With the improved conditions, the public now has access. Successful partnerships result in healthy and sustainable habitat and land use. Groups like Friends are identifying areas that need repair or open space protections and I have supported their riparian habitat restoration projects and innovative resources such as the Nature Based Solutions Tool. An executive level Natural Land Manager position could potentially provide additional expertise in identifying opportunities. It is a conversation worth having with the Executive Director and his Senior Leaders on how this position could fit the overall strategies that they propose.

Commissioner Daniel "Pogo" Pogorzelski (incumbent): I am open to this idea of a Natural Land Manager.

President Kari Steele (incumbent): District staff are constantly evaluating our land holdings to determine the best use for each individual site. As much of our property is along the river way, it is not ideal for traditional stormwater solutions. But preserving much of it for open space is a helpful Green Infrastructure tool that helps lessen the impact of flooding. This is why we are constantly partnering with local communities to lease hundreds of acres of property for open space. I believe we have the current resources to continue this work.

Sharon Waller: Absolutely yes, and I would advocate for it.

4. *How do you imagine the Chicago and Calumet River System in 2030 and what role does the District have in achieving this vision?*

Commissioner Marcelino Garcia (incumbent): I can imagine many great things for the Chicago and Calumet River System heading into 2030 - much-improved water quality, thriving wildlife and habitat, open space along the waterways, and a public's appreciation for the river, due to the completion of the Deep Tunnel in 2029, infrastructural enhancements made by the MWRD to disinfect at Stickney, green infrastructure expansion, and operational resiliencies and efficiencies led by the MWRD. The Chicago and Calumet River System has seen a transformation, and I want to take the opportunity to credit the work and advocacy of so many groups including Friends of the Chicago River. Friends' origins in 1979 started with an inspiring call-to-action, "A Friendless River" and has since accumulated many friends. In 2029, I look forward to celebrating Friends' 50 years of advocacy. Seeing the river realize all the benefits of over the past 50 years is a testament to the organization and will to push on policy and planning. Therefore, in 2030 it will be a great time of reflection and planning for the future to continue protecting the river system.

Commissioner Daniel “Pogo” Pogorzelski (incumbent): We need to work towards the Chicago area waterway system not only becoming more of a recreational amenity but also look at ways that we can restore the heavily altered natural systems which existed here for millennia prior to the establishment and industrialization of the city of Chicago. Pioneering efforts like the Wild Mile on the Chicago River hold much promise with what can be accomplished across the entire Chicago waterway system. The first thing we can do is to continue our efforts to keep our water clean and prevent combined sewer overflow. The second is as a major land owner in Cook County, we must look for opportunities to work with local municipalities to make our land useful to the public as natural areas.

President Kari Steele (incumbent): I imagine the Chicago and Calumet River system as a true marriage of nature and public recreation. I would like to see the rivers continue to grow as destinations for our residents; places where you can see wildlife in the middle of an urban area; where you can take your family on a kayak ride. Of course, there will always be a commercial need for the river system as well, but we can be smarter about the role industry plays along the river. I see the District as a vital part of keeping the river safe from pollutants, and continuing to find partnerships with local communities to enhance the public access to the river system.

Sharon Waller: I would like to see MWRD work with the City of Chicago to develop and incentive program for decentralized water reclamation and reuse to reduce combined sewer overflow following the example of New York City <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/business/drought-water-reuse-development.html>. We should take advantage of opportunities to remove large developments bordering the Chicago Area Water Ways from the old combined sewer system such Lincoln Yards.

5. *What are three ways that the District can contribute to climate resiliency and community health?*

Commissioner Marcelino Garcia (incumbent): In 2023, the MWRD Board of Commissioners adopted an ambitious Climate Action Plan (CAP) when many other utilities were just starting the work on this. Rising temperatures and increasing concerns for flooding have significant consequences on the MWRD’s work. Despite the MWRD’s advancements in water treatment operations, the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP), and other initiatives that improve our region’s water environment, the MWRD can do the following three things. 1.) Expand green stormwater infrastructure projects and funding. 2.) Develop initiatives to lower GHG emissions, find renewable energy sources, and sequester carbon through a thoughtful and tiered approach. Lastly, 3.) Preserve and protect wetlands where even a small size will help clean the water. Climate resiliency at the MWRD requires operational changes and large-scale investments, but the climate action plan provides an important roadmap to guide future infrastructure planning and the protection of our natural resources and community health.

Commissioner Daniel “Pogo” Pogorzelski (incumbent): 1. The first is to continue our push to Green infrastructure. 2. Advocate for more sewer separation within our 126 Municipalities. 3. To use our platform to communicate to people and organizations to change their behaviors and

adopt practices which will help us to better manage our stormwater such as rain barrels, native plants, disconnecting the downspout, and replacing grass with native plants.

President Kari Steele (incumbent): (1) Pursuing the use of bio-energy created in the waste water treatment process; (2) promote and educate on the importance of stormwater projects and everyday tools residents can use to prevent flooding; (3) explore opportunities to partner with community groups on revitalization of the Chicago area waterways.

Sharon Waller: Cook County is the second largest county in the USA, a major contributor to nutrient pollution in the Mississippi River Basin, and a custodian of the Lake Michigan/Great Lakes freshwater supply. The office of MWRD Commissioner is uniquely positioned to work with our state legislature on water policy for our region, so I think we should ask MWRD and our water commissioners to do more than their current job description. We can reduce combined sewer overflow with decentralized water reclamation and reuse following New York City (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/business/drought-waterreuse-development.html>). Our watershed is over-paved, and we must slow water down with green infrastructure, wetlands, and agricultural buffer strips (<https://ensia.com/features/what-a-project-in-wisconsin-can-teach-others-about-working-with-farmers-to-reduce-phosphorus-runoff/>) to reduce flooding, nutrient pollution, and harmful algal blooms. We continue to add “forever chemicals” to our environment at the same time we are spending tax payer dollars to find ways to remove them from our drinking water supply and in MWRD biosolids. Instead, we should be enacting source control following legislation from Maine (<https://www.maine.gov/dep/spills/topics/pfas/PFAS-products/>). Technology exists but lack of policy is a barrier. Since 2022, I have worked with our state legislature and my professional organizations, and together we’ve made real progress with three bills in the Illinois legislature, two task forces formed, and a state water plan with recommendations for reuse. But much more is needed to adapt to climate change.

- 6. After a lengthy legal proceeding before the Illinois Pollution Control Board, the District is now required to disinfect the wastewater effluent discharged from the Calumet and O’Brien WWTPs before it is released into the Chicago and Little Calumet Rivers, respectively. Do you support disinfection at the Stickney WWTP and if so, on what timeline?*

Commissioner Marcelino Garcia (incumbent): Disinfection at the Calumet and O’Brien WRP’s substantially reduced sewage-associated bacteria in the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS). The District’s role is to continue improving the waterway system and that includes seeing the Stickney WRP find the right disinfection solution. As Commissioner, I have consistently advocated for innovative solutions that protect our environment and the surrounding communities.

Commissioner Daniel “Pogo” Pogorzelski (incumbent): The Chicago Area Waterway System witnessed a notable reduction in sewage associated bacteria, thanks to effective disinfection measures implemented at the Calumet and O’Brien Water Reclamation Plants. It is clear to me that the district needs to continue to maintain its commitment to a clean and prosperous environment. When I am reelected, it will be a personal goal of mine to make sure that the

district remains committed to enhancing the waterway system, including finding the optimal disinfection solution for the Stickney Water Reclamation Plant.

President Kari Steele (incumbent): Yes, I support disinfection at the Stickney WRP. As the world's largest treatment plant, I want to make sure we do it right, and explore the best technology out there and proceed only after there has been a careful analysis of the impacts on the plant and area it services.

Sharon Waller: Yes. I support disinfection at Stickney as soon as possible. A previous MWRD Exec Director indicated that re-designation of the water use in the area by IEPA was needed to provide a regulatory driver to justify use of tax payer money. I welcome a conversation on ways to address that. I currently advocate for recreational access through my participation on the City of Chicago River Governance Task Force.

7. Our region is expected to see more heavy rainfall events and significant flooding that will take a combination of gray and green stormwater infrastructure to mitigate. What are your goals, if any, for expanding gray and green infrastructure through District programs, such as Stormstore and the Green Infrastructure Partnership Program?

Commissioner Marcelino Garcia (incumbent): MWRD has led a variety of green initiatives over the last several decades that have reduced its sewer overflows by 85% in the last 35 years. MWRD's current range of programs such as Space to Grow, the discounted rain barrel distribution program, Green Infrastructure Partnership Program, and Flood-Prone Property Acquisition Program are exemplary. GI encompasses individual properties, neighborhoods, municipalities, and regions, but most importantly, it needs to be expanded. My goal is for the MWRD to continue being an active participant in the several watershed council groups which help inform priorities for infrastructure, stormwater, and water quality concerns; create a pipeline of projects in various stages of development; and make the opportunities clear and transparent. MWRD has also had great success executing Intergovernmental Agreements and I would continue to pursue this. I would also support projects that increase sewer capacity and storage improvements in the public right-of-way, and evaluate using vacant land that could be connected to the Tunnel and Reservoir (TARP) System. The flooding emergencies our communities experienced in 2023 will reoccur, which is why MWRD must continue to find funding and bring in members from the community who may otherwise not see the opportunities that lie ahead from innovative projects with the MWRD. Lastly, I've observed a rise in water literacy from residents and businesses in Cook County and that is wonderful progress. I believe it's a result of MWRD's significant contributions and partnerships with groups such as Friends of the Chicago River protecting the water environment and increasing public engagement. Let's keep pushing on that front.

Commissioner Daniel "Pogo" Pogorzelski (incumbent): Throughout my public service journey, I've consistently brought a strong work ethic to every endeavor, driven by a genuine passion for safeguarding the environment and public health. Green infrastructure will contribute to a major part of the stormwater management in the district. The treatment of our water is a passion of mine, which is why I am so proud that the MWRD has collaborated with The Iowa University to create a patent around Blue Algae use in removing chemicals from our water. As I

said earlier, our municipalities need to work with the MWRD to adopt practices which will help us to better manage our stormwater such as rain barrels, native plants, disconnecting the downspout, and replacing grass with native plants. I think more inventive techniques to tackle the upcoming issues we have on our planet are needed.

President Kari Steele (incumbent): First and foremost, my goal is to increase awareness of the need for stormwater infrastructure in our region. Green infrastructure is a critical aspect of environmental protection and stormwater management, especially in communities with aging infrastructure. Community involvement is crucial in implementing successful stormwater management efforts, like green infrastructure. Promoting green infrastructure expansion across Cook County is a continuous effort for the District, and I have made it my mission to educate our residents about not only the stormwater benefits, but also the additional benefits such as improved air quality, enhanced biodiversity, community engagement, and increased resilience to climate change. I'd like to continue to build upon the practices we already implement at the District, such as requiring green infrastructure components in all of our public leases and encouraging voluntary participation in our commercial leases to businesses. We reach out to all municipalities directly at least once a year to solicit green infrastructure projects. We share information on our website & social media sites and we host community events discussing green infrastructure. In addition, we share information about the importance of green infrastructure by promoting our programs like our Rain Barrel Program, the Restore the Canopy program, Stormstore and Space to Grow. We can never talk enough about the need to stay resilient as these rain events get more and more intense.

Sharon Waller: I am advocating for increased green infrastructure grant funding and easing the application requirements. I am also advocating for water reuse. Illinois is the only state in the USA where water reuse is illegal which is ridiculous because water reuse is the natural water cycle that we teach to our 3rd graders. We should view all our water issues in context of the global water cycle to find more sustainable solutions. Other seated commissioners have said that reducing combined sewer overflow (CSO) is impossible, but I think it's disgraceful to say that New York can do it but Chicago can't. Water reuse can help reduce combined sewer overflows following the example of the Dominos Sugar Redevelopment in NYC that is reducing CSOs to the Brooklyn waterfront.