

Environmental Protection of Horner Park Aquifer in Question by Proposed Development

Special environmental concerns have been raised regarding a recent proposal for residential development at the site of Ruby's Dry Cleaners, at the corner of California and Montrose Avenues. The Ruby's site is located within a few hundred feet of a recently-discovered aquifer under Horner Park. That aquifer flows directly into the Chicago River, and ultimately into three other Illinois waterways. The proximity of the site to the aquifer creates potential risks to Illinois waterways. Concerned residents have asked the Illinois EPA to investigate what, if any, additional remediation solutions or considerations might be warranted.

Horner Park is a 54-acre park with one half mile of frontage on the Chicago River. It was built in the late 1940's on the site of a former brick manufacturing operation that took advantage of the rich clay soil adjacent to the river. Approximately 35 acres of the brickyard site was devoted to a large clay pit about 45 ft deep that provided the raw material for the bricks. After the brickyard ceased operations in the 1930's, the city used the site as a landfill until it was sold to the park district in 1946.

In 2013, the US Army Corp of Engineers (USACE) began an extensive restoration of the half-mile of river frontage in Horner Park that included re-grading the shoreline. During the excavation, a USACE contractor broke through the wall of the former clay pit, releasing a stream of stored water into the river. Concerned that the water discharge may have been caused by a broken water main, the water was tested and determined to be solely from rainwater collected in Horner Park and the surrounding area. The aquifer has been described by an engineer as a "giant clay bowl" sitting under the park.

Since the water flow couldn't be stopped, the USACE built a series of vernal pools along the river shoreline to collect and channel the water into the river. The flow is constant as the aquifer is constantly replenished by rain events. Its size is estimated to be approximately 35 acres, matching the size of the former clay pits.

Follow the links for additional materials, including a drawing from 1946 showing the original location of the clay pits, an aerial photo from 1928 showing the pit excavation, photos of the vernal pools being constructed by the USACE in 2014, and a photo from 2018 showing the aquifer discharging its water into the river.