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April 7, 2021

Members of the Village Board
Riverside Village Office
27 Riverside Road
Riverside, IL 60546

Attention: Jessica Frances, Village Manager
jfrances@riverside.il.us

Dear Members of the Village Board:

We are writing to raise serious concerns about plans by the Army Corps of Engineers to proceed with design and construction of a massive flood wall in your historic Village – designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1970. The flood wall would be clearly contrary to the plans of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux who designed Riverside at the request of town leaders in 1868.

Riverside was Olmsted’s first residential suburb and it very much inspired modern American suburban design. It is “the only surviving suburban community with the streets and public ways and public grounds that Olmsted planned.” *FLO: Plans and Views of Communities and Private Estates* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 9.

Introducing a massive flood wall would destroy the integrity of this historic community and introduce built features that are antithetical to this historic landmark. If a 10-foot wall and flood gates are implemented, the picturesque entry at Forest Avenue may lose its scenic and historic character entirely, diminishing the integrity of the NHL designated landscape.

In his detailed report to the Riverside Improvement Company, Olmsted noted the important role that the Des Plaines River played in the overall design. The river “presents much

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beauty,” wrote Olmsted, “and is everywhere susceptible of being refined and enriched by art to a degree which will render it altogether charming.” Olmsted, Vaux & Co., Landscape Architects, “Preliminary Report upon the Proposed Suburban Village at Riverside, Near Chicago,” (New York: September 1, 1868); *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, 6: p. 279.

While he acknowledged the challenges of water runoff and drainage, he did not recommend concrete walls but instead suggested good “drainage, not only for a road, but for the whole district through which it would pass.” *Ibid.*, p. 276. The report includes a picture of the river and its scenery as well as a plan clearly delineating trees and shrubbery along the shores. *Ibid.*, p. 280, 282-83.

There are NO Olmsted designs that incorporate a flood wall. And decorating the surface of the wall with an ersatz “Olmsted design” fails to integrate the wall into the design. Indeed, in the 19th century, Olmsted avoided masonry structures, introducing the concept of green infrastructure. Addressing engineering challenges, naturally, was a central tenet of his landscape designs. Boston’s Emerald Necklace – the location of Franklin Park cited for its “stone design”--offers examples of how Olmsted used natural solutions to address drainage concerns. In a paper on the “Back Bay Problem and Its Solution,” Olmsted rejects a retaining wall as “very costly” and “far from an attractive circumstance.”

Recent and projected flooding of the Des Plaines River should be addressed using Army Corps of Engineer guidelines, *Engineering with Nature*, to shape a solution that protects and preserves Olmsted and Vaux’s naturalistic design while resolving flooding in a manner compatible with it.

[Engineering with Nature](#) explores ecologically sensitive approaches to flood control that could retain the scenic and historic landscape character that contributes to the integrity of this unique historic community. This approach is strongly urged to address flooding concerns. Because it has been many years since the Riverside flooding issues were first examined, we respectfully urge you to take a step back and insist that the Corps, in keeping with Olmstedian principles and new capabilities, assess green infrastructure before proceeding.

Sincerely,



Anne Neal Petri
President and CEO

Cc:

Charles Pipal, Chair, Historic Preservation Committee
Cathy Maloney, Chair, Landscape Advisory Commission
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