



REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Greening the Vertical Plane

A framework for treating building surfaces as public landscape

"Connecting People, Plants, and the Communities that surround us...Vertically"

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Full interactive framework, research citations, and this presentation online at elevationlivingwalls.com/vertical-plane-urban-green-infrastructure

Watch the remarks as delivered: [Presentation Link](#)



OPENING — THE VERTICAL PLANE

Good morning. I'm David Bishop with Elevation Living Walls.

When we talk about green infrastructure, we usually look down — parks, parkways, bioswales, the urban forest. Lately we've started looking up, too — at green roofs.

I want to talk about the space in between: **the vertical plane.**

Here's the opportunity. Across this region, we're not short on surface — we're short on acreage. Village halls, libraries, schools, police stations, parking decks, transit facilities, courtyards, downtown buildings — we already own and maintain all of it.

What if the sides of those buildings counted as landscape? Not decoration. Infrastructure.

Let's be clear about what this is not. Vertical greening doesn't replace trees, prairie, native habitat, bioswales or green roofs. Anyone telling you otherwise is selling something.

It connects them. We already plan for green space at grade. We're getting better at habitat and stormwater on roofs. The wall in between usually gets treated as leftover architecture. In the right location, it's part of the network instead.

1 — CONNECT THE GREEN

Chicago's own green roof research gives us a clue: native bee abundance and species richness increased with more surrounding green space. A green roof — or a living wall — isn't an ecological island that solves biodiversity on its own. It works because of what's around it.

In sequence, planted ground, walls and roofs become a connected network of ecological stepping stones.

Picture it: a pollinator planting at a civic plaza, vegetation on the facade next to it, a planted terrace above that, a green roof over the top. Each piece has value alone. Together, they start to describe a landscape instead of a scatter of green objects.

2 — DESIGN THE WALL AS HABITAT

Plants on a wall don't automatically mean habitat. If biodiversity is the goal, we have to design for it: plant diversity, bloom succession, pollinator forage, water, exposure, and connection to the green space around it.

Vertical systems can support real pollinator visitation — and plant richness and flower cover appear to drive how much. The word that matters is **design**. We shouldn't claim ecological performance just because something is green.

3 — MAKE EVERY SURFACE WORK HARDER

Built surface is expensive. It should do more than one job.

A planted wall can provide habitat, shade part of a facade, cool the area through evapotranspiration, and — depending on system and climate — contribute to thermal performance. Where it's technically appropriate, it can factor into a broader water strategy too.

A wall alone won't solve stormwater. But think of the building as one system: a roof captures water, a cistern stores it, and that water supports landscape at grade — and potentially the vertical plane above it. Once you see it that way, the roof, the building and the landscape aren't separate conversations anymore.

4 — THIS IS ZONE 5

This is northeastern Illinois. **January doesn't care about our design intent.**

Freeze-thaw cycles, wind, summer heat, road salt, wide swings in exposure — a vertical landscape that works here has to start with the right plant material, light, irrigation, drainage, growing media, winter strategy and maintenance access.

That last one matters most. Sustainability isn't what a project looks like at the ribbon-cutting. **A sustainable project is the one still thriving in year ten.**

Credit to Mark Woolbright of Verdtech, who's spent years on the engineering side of these systems — how they're built and kept performing — for opening the door to this conversation.

5 — THE GREENEST REGION COMPACT OPPORTUNITY

My ask today is modest, and specific.

I looked at the Compact's Land and Water goals before I came. Right now, nothing in that language covers this. Goal L30 asks communities to “*increase the quality and amount of sustainable landscaping,*” and lists things like native plantings and turf replacement as examples. The Water goal asks communities to

“optimize the use of natural and built systems to manage stormwater.” Vertical greening fits both. It's just not named in either one yet.

I'm not asking you to reopen the 49 goals or stand up a new program — that's a bigger lift than this deserves, and it's not mine to ask for. I'm asking that the next time the Framework Tool and its guidance get refreshed, the vertical plane gets added to the list of recognized practices under those two goals — alongside green roofs, native plantings and bioswales.

Not a mandate. A surface worth counting.

That's a one-line addition. But it's the line that gives the next village planner, landscape architect or sustainability coordinator permission to see a blank wall as an opportunity instead of an afterthought.

CLOSING — PLANTS GROW PEOPLE

There's one more reason I think this matters. Plants make infrastructure visible. A bioswale, a green roof you can see from above, a living wall at a library, a planted facade downtown — these give people something they can actually experience. Infrastructure people can see, and value, gets funded, maintained and protected.

I've got a phrase I keep coming back to: **plants grow people**. When we create healthier conditions for plants, we tend to create healthier, more engaging conditions for people too.

So as you think about the next generation of green infrastructure in this region:

Look down. Look up. And look straight ahead.

The next piece of public landscape may already exist — the wall nobody thought of as landscape.

Thank you.

LEARN MORE

Full framework & this presentation	elevationlivingwalls.com/vertical-plane-urban-green-infrastructure
Caucus meeting recap green-roofs-and-living-walls	mayorscaucus.org/environment-committee-9-15-26-green-roofs-and-living-walls
Compact companion document David Bishop	Model language for Strategies L30 & W29 — available on request from David Bishop
Greenest Region Compact	mayorscaucus.org/initiatives/environment/rec
GRC Framework Tool	Framework Tool PDF (mayorscaucus.org)
Plant Hackers Network	planthackers.org
Verdtech (Mark Woolbright)	verdtech.com

RESEARCH & EVIDENCE CITED

Chicago · Pollinators	Tonietto et al., “Bee Communities of Chicago Green Roofs, Parks and Prairies” — chicagobotanic.org
Vertical Greening	“Vertical and Horizontal Plantings” comparison, pollinator visitation — ScienceDirect
Green Walls · Biodiversity	“Plant Diversity and Flower Cover as Drivers of Pollinator Abundance” — ScienceDirect
U.S. EPA	“Environmental Benefits of Green Infrastructure” — epa.gov/green-infrastructure
U.S. EPA · Heat	“Green Infrastructure and Urban Heat” — epa.gov/green-infrastructure
Building Performance	“Green Wall Thermal Performance Review” — ScienceDirect



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