

Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways and Trails Plan – 2009 Update: Executive Summary

What Is a Greenway?

Greenways are conceptual corridors of natural landscape elements. Greenways may range from narrow corridors of undeveloped landscape that run through urban and suburban development, to wide corridors that incorporate diverse natural and cultural features. A greenway can be land- or water-based. It can incorporate both public and private property, but always provides benefits for the larger community. Some are primarily recreational corridors, while others function almost exclusively for environmental protection and are not necessarily intended for substantial human passage. Some greenways run along stream corridors, shorelines, or wetlands; others follow abandoned railway tracks or other land-based features.

Greenways differ in their location and function, but a greenway network will protect natural and cultural resources, provide recreational opportunities, improve and sustain hydrological functions, and enhance the natural beauty and the quality of life in neighborhoods and communities.

What is a Regional Greenways Plan Trail?

In this plan, regional trails are multi-jurisdictional facilities offering recreational opportunities and transportation uses, connecting communities and greenways throughout the region. While on-road bicycling presents many benefits, the emphasis in this plan is primarily existing and planned off-road facilities. The regional trail alignments in the plan are conceptual and long-range. Regional trails include a variety of facility types, suitable for bicycling, walking, and paddling, but also offer diverse uses such as roller-blading, equestrian uses, and cross-country skiing. This plan emphasizes trail connectivity and synergies with regional greenways; many of the trails in this plan offer a “green experience” in the midst of a highly urbanized environment. This plan also emphasizes consistency with locally- and county-based trail plans enhancing opportunities to partner in the implementation of this plan.

Why Do We Need a Regional Greenways and Trails Plan?

A greenways and trails plan offers a vision of continuous greenway and trail corridors, linked across jurisdictions, providing scenic beauty, natural habitat, or recreational opportunities for our communities. Many jurisdictions govern land use and landscape design in northeastern Illinois, so developing a regionally coordinated and connected vision of greenways and trails across these jurisdictions can inform local land-use decisions, and hopefully inspire decisions about development that are consistent with the greenways and trails identified. In addition, greenways and trails projects, including land acquisition, can enhance our communities. Greenway projects inspired by this plan offer some combination of the following characteristics:

- Benefits large populations in multiple communities
- Bridges gaps to help complete greenways
- Creates new connections between greenways
- Provides wildlife migration paths between isolated natural areas
- Protects tributary streams to preserve water quality and ecological value in main regional waterways
- Protects residential and commercial areas threatened by flood damage
- Improves access to recreational trails where it is currently lacking
- Protects high quality natural areas threatened by development

- Protects important scenic vistas and historic areas from development
- Increases access to open space for mature and distressed communities with disadvantaged populations
- Offers a variety of recreational uses
- Provides alternative transportation routes (walking, bicycling) and improves access to public transportation systems

A Changing Environment for Greenway Planning

The Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways and Trails Plan was first adopted in 1992, and then updated in 1997. Changes in northeastern Illinois have brought on the need to update the plan. For one, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning was created to insure transportation, land use and other focus areas are addressed in concert to create a comprehensive regional plan that presents a unified vision for the region's future. In addition, Kendall County has become part of the northeastern Illinois region. Also, the serious clean water supply concerns in this region are beginning to be addressed through the State and Regional Water Supply Planning initiative. Northeastern Illinois is also facing health concerns related to physical inactivity, which more recreational opportunities and more connections to the natural environment can help address.

The one-hundredth anniversary of Burnham and Bennett's 1909 Plan of Chicago also brings to the fore historic initiatives and visionary goals for the region concerning nature, open space, and green corridors, including the establishment of forest preserves, improvement of the lakefront, and efforts to develop and protect a system of connected open spaces. The public's enthusiasm about this anniversary could have a lasting impact on the realization of Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways and Trails Plan.

Key Features of the Map

This map updates existing and proposed regional greenways and trails, major open space, and connections among them. It includes the locations of Illinois Nature Preserves, and sites on the Illinois and County Natural Areas Inventories. Many of these high quality areas are within designated greenways and existing open space and need to be protected. The regional trail system may, where appropriate, provide opportunities for viewing these areas, but care must be taken to protect fragile Natural Area resources from adverse impacts. Unprotected natural areas sites need to be given preservation status through acquisition or other means, as appropriate.

Streams are a vital part of this plan; they are focal points for environmental education and stewardship; they can provide valued opportunities for canoeing and kayaking; they can be rich centers of biodiversity; and they can provide important water quality, water supply, and flood mitigation functions.

Greenway corridors shown as existing on the map (darker green) are in the public domain, while the trails that are shown as existing are completed and open to the public. Proposed trails as illustrated are largely conceptual; final alignments would be determined by the jurisdiction through its planning and engineering processes. A more detailed map and database are available from CMAP to coordinate such planning. While some of the connecting trail proposals that are fairly close together are shown as one corridor on the map, the greenway plan facilities in the CMAP database reflect both.

The **Primary Regional Trail System** identified on this map is the "backbone" of the regional trail system. The map also identifies important existing and proposed trails that make critical direct links that interconnect the backbone trails, communities, and greenways. Existing and proposed trails that connect

the regional system, forest preserves and conservation areas are also identified as primary; trail loops within forest preserves and conservation areas that don't provide connections to the regional system are not generally included. Connections that follow more circuitous routes and/or those that would have to depend on development of a number of adjacent trails to connect to the major trails are not included. The Primary Regional System designation does not necessarily indicate priority trails for development, however many coincide with the county priorities listed in the plan document. The intention is that trails will be developed based on opportunities (private land development, public land acquisition, or complementary infrastructure development), the availability of funds and other resources, staff expertise, and policy support from elected officials.

Green Trails or trails that are shown buffered by a green corridor offer, for most of their length, a "green experience." A path with relatively large amount of vegetation or scenic vistas would be included. Off-road paths along a highly developed corridor with very little vegetation, for example, do not have a green buffer. With very few exceptions, greenways plan trails do not include on-road signed facilities.

The Route 66 Trail is a plan to give trail users opportunities to explore sights, cities, towns, and rural areas of Route 66. The vision consists of off-road paths and comfortable roads for bicycles, equestrians, and hikers. In cases where the route coincides with major backbone trails, it is identified on the map. Certain highly urbanized, long-running, on-road sections of this proposed trail are not included in this plan, owing to the off-road emphasis of this plan.

The Grand Illinois Trail is a 475 mile loop trail for hiking and biking that uses existing and planned trails in northern Illinois. Major greenway plan trails are included in this loop, as well as some on-road routes essential to creating the loop. The map identifies the routes as "GIT."

The Plan Document

The plan includes actions that would contribute to implementation of the plan. These recommended actions in the plan are not necessarily site specific, but may indicate general priority areas. The seven general objectives identified in the plan are contained in the following list.

- Objective 1: Preserve Additional Greenway Open Space
- Objective 2: Preserve and Improve the Quality and Biodiversity of Existing Open Space, including Greenways
- Objective 3: Improve the Effectiveness and Use of Trails
- Objective 4: Expand the Existing Regional Trail System and Create Linkages
- Objective 5: Expand the Region's Efforts to Protect, Restore and Utilize Water-Based Greenways
- Objective 6: Improve the Transportation Benefits of Trails
- Objective 7: Sustain and Strengthen the Funding Base for Trails and Greenways

Implementation of the Regional Greenways and Trails Plan will require a partnership effort among state natural resource and transportation agencies, forest preserve and park districts, county and municipal governments, conservation and recreation advocacy organizations, and private landowners. Specific actions to implement the seven objectives are detailed in the plan document.

An important function of the Regional Greenways and Trails Plan and the plan map is to support the programs of open space jurisdictions which are working to preserve and manage greenway corridors. Much of the on-the-ground implementation will occur through the initiative of the forest preserve and conservation districts, park districts, municipalities, counties, and state and federal agencies, including the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Illinois Department of Transportation. The open

space, outdoor recreation, and natural resource advocacy organizations of the region play an invaluable role in plan implementation.

*This summary is intended as an overview of the officially adopted Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways and Trails Plan. The Plan and map are both on CMAP's website at <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov>.

For more specific information about regional existing or proposed trails, such as where the proposal originated, contact CMAP at 312-454-0400.