

SKOKIE REVIEW

Covering ground: Completed Skokie bike path allows travel from north to south

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Bike trail, Rails To Trails, downtown Skokie, bicycles, walking

The temporary unavailability of Yellow Line train service notwithstanding, Skokie right now may be an easier place to get around without four wheels and an engine than ever before.

Village leaders have espoused a mission of making Skokie more pedestrian and cyclist-friendly. In recent years, added bike lanes, reconfigured sidewalks and streets, new bike paths traveling from one part of town to another and a housing project with a pedestrian-friendly way of life in mind have all moved the village in that direction.

The latest chapter this summer is completion of the "Rails To Trails" bike path — at least Skokie's portion — that travels from the Skokie Swift Dempster Street station on the north to Lincoln Avenue right near the Lincolnwood border on the south.

Village officials say that Lincolnwood has plans to extend the path further and eventually link it up with Chicago bike paths for a much longer, uninterrupted ride.

But for now, this summer's opening of the southern portion of the path — from downtown Skokie almost into Lincolnwood — means that bikers and walkers can cover all kinds of territory in Skokie with key stops along the way.

Equally important to many this summer is the completion of long-awaited designated bike lanes along east-west Main Street. For years, cyclists have complained about riding conditions on Main, which is a key street for taking travelers to the east and west ends of the village.

Last year, the Skokie Village Board gave final approval to both projects. In the case of the "Rails To Trails" bike path, it entered into a local agency agreement for federal funding to complete the southern portion of the path.

The total project cost was \$994,500, 80 percent of which came from a grant from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency For Planning, the balance of \$198,900 of which was paid for from the village's capital improvement budget.

The village last year also hired Christopher B. Burke Engineering Ltd. of Rosemont for \$38,824 for the Main Street bike lane project. While engineering services were Skokie's responsibility, funds for the project also came from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency For Planning through a Congestion Mitigation Air Quality grant.

The Main Street bike lanes run almost the entire length of the village.

The "Rails to Trails" bike path was completed in two phases.

The northern portion, which runs from downtown through the Illinois Science + Technology Park and ends at the Skokie Swift station on Dempster, covers about three-quarters of a mile and opened a few years ago.

The newly-arrived southern portion, which runs from downtown across Skokie Boulevard and past the Emily Oaks Nature Center, covers another mile or so, making the entire path about 1.7 miles.

From the beginning, landscape architect Phil Hutchinson said, the plan for the path called for using "native" grasses, small shrubs and flowering trees.

The Skokie Review traveled the full trail Sunday, August 2 on a sunny morning to get a feel for what Hutchinson had in mind. Perhaps the first observation to be made is that the path had a quieter and more tranquil feel than any of the planners likely imagined.

That's because the path follows the Yellow Line tracks where train service is not scheduled to resume until October, as previously reported by the Skokie Review. There were no rumbling trains or downed gates for crossings, and with only a few people on the trail at the time, it felt far removed from an area the size of Skokie.

That peace and quiet seemed to be embraced by the few people on the trail.

"I just started using this a couple weeks ago, and I took a week off of work so I walked every day," said Jen Kenny during a brisk walk on the trail. "I like it a lot. You don't have to deal with traffic, and I love that nature center there."

The nature center that Kenny said she enjoys is the Skokie Park District's Emily Oaks Nature Center, which sits smack dab in the middle of the new extended portion of the trail.

The extended path also includes easy exits and entrances into neighborhoods. One of them led to a nearby park where Affun Rashid, 4, was playing with his mother nearby. Affun showed off the scooter he uses when he enjoys the new trail.

Stephen Parlankian said he rides his bicycle in the area often, and the new trail has been a major convenience for him in getting from the city to his job in Wilmette.

"The streets around here were not that easy to ride down," he said. "It's nice now to be able to duck onto the trail and not face the traffic anymore."

The older north leg of the trail begins with an antiquated-looking, spiffy red water fountain donated by the Rotary Club of Skokie Valley. It sits near an enclosed rest shelter, benches and a bike rack. The path travels north through the heart of the Illinois Science + Technology Park until it reaches the end, the Dempster Street Skokie Swift station.

It is noticeable that the northern portion of the path has been up and running a few years; the native vegetation seems to have grown more fully, the landscape looks a bit more finished.

Teddy Kubiec and Melanie Naumiak were taking a leisurely Sunday stroll on the trail as they headed south toward Dempster Street.

"I've been using the trail often," Kubiec said. "I usually ride my bike to the local gym and this takes me away from the street., which I like."

This was only Naumiak's second time using the trail because she often gets from spot to spot in her car, she admitted.

"I would like to use it more, and I would if I walked more," she said. "In fact, I'd like to start using the path more now and not drive as much whenever it's possible."

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