

Transportation | updated: 6/6/2016 11:14 AM

# Why it's so hard to make bike trails



**DuPage County is ahead of the game when it comes to bike trails, with long established routes like the Great Western Trail that has overpasses like this one over I-355 in Lombard. But overpasses and underpasses to increase safety for riders can cost a few million dollars each.**

*Courtesy of DuPage County*



**Neil Holdway**

When Lake County Board Chairman Aaron Lawlor pulled his support for extending Route 53 north, one thing he proposed instead was a greenway that would include "a new trail corridor through the center of Lake County."

The idea really is the latest of several trail systems proposed or already in place to allow people to get around the suburbs more easily -- without cars.

But trails don't necessarily come about any more easily than highways.

Lake County already has a long trail extending 31 miles north to south, the [Des Plaines River Trail](http://www.lcprd.org/dprt/) (<http://www.lcprd.org/dprt/>). Yet its final 1,600-foot link wasn't completed until last fall, more than two years after the

owner of the land needed for the connection finally sold it to the forest preserve district, which had been asking for 20 years.

That land cost more than \$200,000, and then there was the work to actually build the trail.

"This trail building is not a cheap thing," said Randy Seebach, director of planning and land preservation for the forest preserve. He put the cost at \$350,000 a mile, "and that's just straight trail building."

The Des Plaines River Trail -- already considered "kind of the spine" connecting the county, Seebach said -- traverses only the eastern portion of the county, so the county has been working on more trails farther west to connect to it.

Its biggest project has been the Millennium Trail (<http://www.lcfd.org/millennium-trail/>), in the works for nearly two decades. It starts in central Lake County in the Lakewood Forest Preserve, and plans call for it to ultimately loop around to both ends of the Des Plaines River Trail. Some 27 miles, now in three segments, out of 35 miles planned are complete.

The county continues to work on more missing links, slowly. Cost is part of the difficulty. A single half-mile link connecting the Mari Flat and Kestrel Ridge forest preserves near Round Lake opened last fall, with a tunnel under Wilson Road. It cost about \$3 million.

Governmental jurisdiction is also a factor. The Lake County Division of Transportation considers trails in its roadway improvements, and village governments play a role, too.

"We always try to get partners so it's not all our responsibility," Seebach said, "because it really benefits the local community."

A future link along Route 173 west of Route 45 is the Illinois Department of Transportation's responsibility. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (<http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/>) provides some trail funding, and the Northwest Municipal Conference, which counts 45 suburban governments in its membership, also helps plan trails and bike routes.

The Active Transportation Alliance (<http://activetrans.org/>), based in Chicago, gets involved in suburban trails, too. Within its mission of creating transportation alternatives to cars is bringing different agencies together to create bicycle trails.

For example, while the Lake County portion of the Des Plaines River Trail is finally complete, "the trail conditions are a little different once you cross into Cook County," said Nancy Wagner, a suburban outreach manager for the alliance. So last year a plan was drawn up (<http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/documents/10180/301357/Des+Plaines+River+Corridor+Plan+08-13-14.pdf/31b7e518-fb6c-4d47-abcf-9786a000b7ab>) by the alliance and the Northwest Municipal Conference (<http://www.nwmc-cog.org/>) with input from Cook County, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the state and other agencies to improve the trail and connections to it. The list of proposed tasks is long, and costs, especially to create safe street crossings, could run into tens of millions. The whole project could take two decades to implement, Wagner said.

Some individual suburbs put together their own bike-route planning teams. Hoffman Estates (<http://www.hoffmanestates.org/government/development-services/transportation-engineering/bikes-and-peds>) already has added bike lanes and paths. Arlington Heights ([http://www.vah.com/government/commissions/bicycle\\_commission.aspx](http://www.vah.com/government/commissions/bicycle_commission.aspx)) wants to help bicyclists more easily cross busy streets. Antioch (<http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/programs-and-resources/lta/antioch>) has worked since 2014 to connect to regional county trails.

IDOT helps because of the state's complete-streets law, which requires safe bicycling and pedestrian options in its new road projects. But the road projects have to be on the books first, and the suburbs have to ask to be involved, said Leslie

Phemister, another suburban outreach manager with the Transportation Alliance.

The state of Illinois' finances don't help, either.

"The state budget does have a very local impact with these projects and plans," Wagner said.

DuPage County is ahead of the game. Its [Illinois Prairie Path \(https://www.dupageco.org/EDP/Bikeways\\_and\\_Trails/1146/\)](https://www.dupageco.org/EDP/Bikeways_and_Trails/1146/) is one of the country's original rails-to-trails projects, where old rail beds were converted. It and the Great Western Trail can connect with Kane County's [Fox River Trail \(http://northernfoxrivervalley.com/guide/fox-river-bike-trail/\)](http://northernfoxrivervalley.com/guide/fox-river-bike-trail/) to make a system of more than 40 miles going through several suburbs, including many downtowns.

DuPage County has done still more, mapping out a "Century Trail" -- 100 miles to commemorate 100 years of the forest preserve district. The Prairie Path and Great Western Trail are included, but so are smaller trails long established in the county, such as those in the Mallard Lake and Hawk Hollow forest preserves near the Tri-Villages and Springbrook Prairie near Naperville.

The Century Trail project came together with the help of volunteers -- another way trails and bike routes get done. No new infrastructure was involved, not even route signs or road markings; [a cue sheet on a web page \(http://dupageforest.org/trailchallenge/\)](http://dupageforest.org/trailchallenge/) tells riders where to go.

"That's what we like to see, all these people being proactive," Phemister said.

But DuPage County has costly trail links in the works, too. One is a 1-mile trail and bridge over County Farm Road connecting the Mallard Lake and Hawk Hollow trails, in the works for some 15 years at a cost of \$4 million. Ground breaks on that this week. And a 1.5-mile link will connect Pratt's Wayne Woods with the Illinois Prairie Path at a cost of \$3.1 million.

The county also is working with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning on bicycle and pedestrian improvements around the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway. A note pops up on [a web page on the subject \(http://www.eohbikepedplan.com/\)](http://www.eohbikepedplan.com/), however, that the project is on hold due to state budget problems.

Is a new central trail the answer for Lake County? The Active Transportation Alliance is well aware of the county's commuting troubles, Wagner said, but it has a lot of reason to think a trail can work if it's easy to access.

"What the data have shown repeatedly is if you build it, people will come," she said.

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