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# First phase of North Branch Trail extension opens



**Forest Preserves of Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle was joined by federal, state and local officials, along with area residents and Forest Preserves volunteers at a ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the opening of the first phase of the North Branch Trail extension.**

*Courtesy of Forest Preserves of Cook County*

## Submitted by Forest Preserves of Cook County

Forest Preserves of Cook County President Toni Preckwinkle was joined by federal, state and local officials, along with area residents and Forest Preserves volunteers at a ribbon-cutting ceremony at Thaddeus S. "Ted" Lechowicz Woods in Chicago to mark the opening of the first phase of the North Branch Trail extension.

The already popular North Branch Trail now extends 1.8 miles south from Caldwell and Devon avenues to Forest Glen. Construction on an additional 1.2 miles of paved trail is underway and will continue the extension of the North Branch bike trail, southeast to Gompers Park near the Forest Preserves' LaBaugh Woods and Irene C. Hernandez Picnic Grove at Foster Avenue.

"The Forest Preserves offer more than 300 miles of trails in Cook County, which serve as a gateway to nature," said Preckwinkle. "We are proud to mark the completion of phase one of this extension, which will serve additional Chicago residents, as well as those in eight neighboring suburbs."

The southern extension of the North Branch Trail is one of several trail construction projects initiated to improve and enhance existing trails for better connectivity, as well as well as create new trails that expose people to the abundant

nature within Cook County.

"Cook County residents are fortunate to have nearly 70,000 acres of green space in the third largest city in the country," said Forest Preserves of Cook County General Superintendent Arnold Randall. "Trails are a way for people to spend time being active outdoors, and we are happy to extend the North Branch Trail to additional Chicago residents who can take the trail as far north to the Chicago Botanic Garden, just one of the many signature Forest Preserve properties."

The first phase of the extension provides a direct connection to the existing 18-mile North Branch Bicycle Trail as well as a 10-foot wide asphalt trail and two new bridges; one over the North Branch of the Chicago River at Central Street; and another over the Metra tracks serving the Milwaukee District North Line.

Improvements also feature a new, on-demand signalized crossing at the Matthew Bieszczat Volunteer Resource Center, 6100 N. Central Ave.

"The North Branch Trail is a wonderful amenity to residents in the 39th ward, as well as those living near Gompers Park further south," said Alderman Margaret Laurino. "In addition to connecting more people to nature, the North Branch Trail helps bolster local businesses near the trail."

The North Branch Trail compliments the Chicago Department of Transportation's (CDOT) Complete Streets initiative for on-street bikeways, allowing the FPCC to eventually connect one of the Forest Preserves' trails to the city of Chicago's Lakefront Trail, which has been part of both agencies' long range plans to bring together two of the region's best used trails.

"Mayor Emanuel supports the vision of a continuous trail along the Chicago River, and the new 1.8 mile trail from Edgebrook to Forest Glen helps close the gap between Chicago's riverfront park trails and Cook County's 18-mile North Branch Trail," said CDOT Commissioner Rebekah Scheinfeld."

The southern extension costs \$7.7 million, with 80 percent of the project being federally funded by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program.

"As metropolitan Chicago's comprehensive planning agency, CMAP actively supports implementation of the Green Infrastructure Vision for our seven-county region," said Joseph C. Szabo, CMAP executive director.

"By programming federal funds to projects like the North Branch trail, greenway trails in the region have increased to 771 miles -- more than halfway to our 2040 goal of about 1,300 miles."

The remaining 20 percent of the project is funded by the Forest Preserves, along with \$192,000 of Open Space Impact Fee Funds designated by Alderman Margaret Laurino (39th).

The FPCC awarded contractors \$5.3 million for the first stage of construction and \$2.3 million for the second phase, which includes a \$1.6 million grant from a federal Transportation Alternatives Program to supplement CMAQ funding.

"As an avid biker and lover of the outdoors, I fully understand the value places like the North Branch Trail provide as a haven for local wildlife and an oasis for Chicagoans. I believe that this new extension of the North Branch Trail will continue to solidify Chicago as a national leader in sustainability and support the city's pedestrian and cycling infrastructure," said Rep. Mike Quigley, 5th District of Illinois.

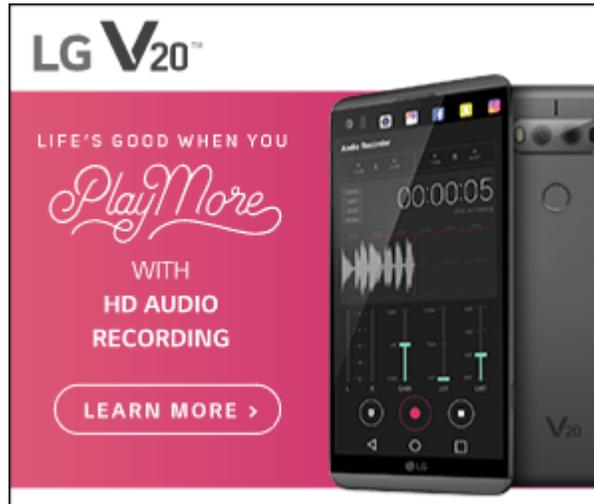
"I am proud of the work that's being accomplished by the Forest Preserves of Cook County to improve and extend the trail and make sure it remains an important part of the lives of Chicagoans for generations to come."

Phase two of the North Branch Trail southern extension is expected to be complete by the end of 2016.

Since the release of its Recreational Master Plan in 2013, the Forest Preserves has been building trails at a rapid pace, with 16 percent of the entire system being built in the last two years. With 150.3 miles of paved trails, 24.3 of those miles have been built since 2014.

In addition to the Chicago Department of Transportation and CMAP, supporters and partners of the North Branch Trail extension include the Illinois Department of Transportation, Active Transportation Alliance, Trails for Illinois and the United States Bicycle Route System.

For information on the North Branch Trail, including bike rental opportunities or to download a trail map, visit [www.fpdcc.com](http://www.fpdcc.com) (<http://www.fpdcc.com>).



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