

# Active Trans Launches a New Proposal for a Grand Riverfront Trail System

By John Greenfield Oct 19, 2016



Erie Park in River North includes a couple blocks of riverfront path. Photo: John Greenfield

On Monday the Active Transportation Alliance released their action plan for a continuous Chicago River Trail, one that would provide a corridor for pedestrians and bicyclists along the north and south branches of the river, connecting with existing suburban trails. [You can read an executive summary of their proposal here.](#)

The advocacy group argues that while Chicago’s lakefront park and trail system is excellent, our riverfront still isn’t living up to its full potential. They say that the heavy use of local trails like the Lakefront Trail and the Bloomingdale shows there is latent demand for a robust riverfront trail system that would serve as both a recreation and healthy transportation facility.

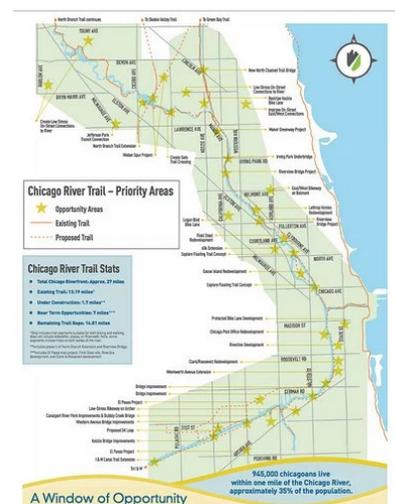
The new system would also be a shot in the arm for the local economy, providing sustainable economic development opportunities, including tourism and retail. Active Trans notes that nearly one million Chicagoans live within a mile of the river.

Civic leaders have been calling for a continuous Chicago River Trail ever since Daniel Burnham’s 1909 Plan for Chicago. Recently, [Our Great Rivers](#), a visioning document for all three of Chicago’s rivers, was released as part of a project led by the Metropolitan Planning Council, in partnership with the city, Friends of the Chicago River, and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, with input from thousands of residents.

According to Active Trans, almost half of the 27 miles of Chicago riverfront has existing trail segments, and several more miles are planned over the next few years. 14.8 miles of riverfront have no trail, but seven miles of river would be relatively easy to build trail segments on in the foreseeable future, the group says.

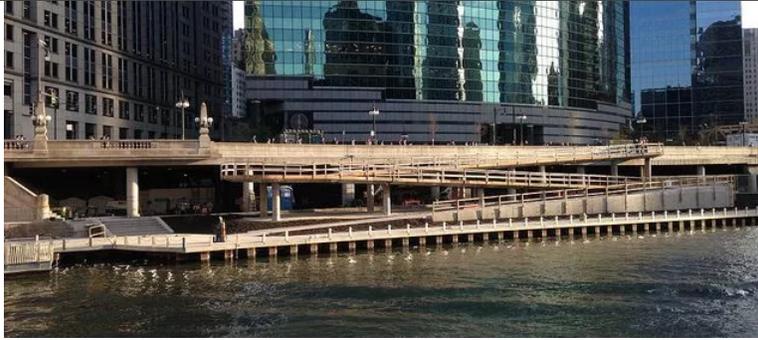
Active Trans has been in talks with neighborhood organizations in various communities along the river corridor to get input on the needs for the trail in local communities, ways to improve river access, and upcoming projects that could affect the construction of future stretches of trail.

The advocacy group notes that several upcoming projects offer opportunities to build new trail segments, including sections built as part of privately funded developments. Potential sites include El Paseo Trail project in Little Village and Pilsen, the south extension of the North Branch Trail, the Chicago Riverwalk expansion, the Bridgeport rowing center, the former Finkl Steel site, the redevelopment of Lathrop Homes, and planned developments in the South Loop and on Goose Island.



A map from the executive summary shows potential locations for new trail segments. [Click to enlarge.](#)

## STREETSBLOG



A new section of riverwalk, including wheelchair-friendly ramps, under construction between Franklin and Lake. Photo: John Greenfield

In locations where riverbank is not available due to issues like private ownership and industrial uses, there are a number of possibilities for linking trail segments. The Riverview Bridge project, scheduled for completion next year between Addison and Irving Park, is an example of decked trail, suspended over the river on pylons. Other options include floating trail segments, as have been built in cities like Philadelphia and Portland, and high-quality on-street connections.

Earlier this week, Active Trans hosted a riverfront cruise for community leaders and members of the media to highlight their proposals. “Our objective tonight is to get you on board with the idea of a continuous Chicago River Trail,” said executive director Ron Burke, addressing the passengers. “We’re going to need the mayor and aldermen to get on board in a major way, similar to the Chicago Riverfront.”



Jim Merrell speaks about the Chicago River Trail plan. Photo: John Greenfield

Jim Merrell, the group’s advocacy director, addressed the issue that many residents may ask why it’s important to build the river trail now when the city has so many fiscal demands. He noted that the project would have health, environmental, and economic benefits. “A truly magnificent river trail would be another thing that draws millions of people to Chicago,” he said.

Moreover, it might take relatively little city money to complete the trail, Merrell added, since the city has a proven track record of creative financing of big projects. For example, the Chicago Riverwalk is being funded by a federal loan that will be paid back through docking and concession fees.

We headed west on the main branch of the river from the Trump Tower dock, passing by the under-construction final segments of the riverwalk, slated to open this weekend. We then turned north up the North Branch, passing by bustling Erie Park, which features a couple blocks of riverfront path, and numerous developments with sections of riverfront that appear to be private, but are actually open to the public during regular park hours.

# STREETSBLOG



The undeveloped land between Roosevelt and Ping Tom Park is slated to become the Riverline development. Photo: John Greenfield

We passed by Goose Island, where some of the new tech companies moving in are already talking about building new off-street bikeways to make it easier for employees to get to work without driving.

At North Avenue we turned around and headed down the South Branch towards Chinatown. A large stretch of wilderness on the east bank of the river between Roosevelt and Ping Tom Park, currently occupied by homeless encampments, is slated to be transformed into the Riverline development. That provides an opportunity for the city to get another mile or so of riverwalk at little or no cost, since a 1999 ordinance requires riverfront developers to provide a 30-foot easement, and this usually means a public path is built.

“We’ve been talking to people in the real estate community, and they understand the importance of connecting the existing trail sections,” Merrell told me. “But advocacy is going to be really important to hold the developers and governmental agencies accountable and make sure Riverline is done right. So our [Chicago River Plan] document is designed for a lay audience – it’s a way to get people excited and involved.”

Tags: Chicago River Trail, Jim Merrell, Our Great Rivers, Ron Burke

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