

# Trail Connect Chicagoland

## Linking Our Regional Trails

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chicagoland's regional trail network has been built one trail at a time through the hard work of local trail advocates, elected officials, government agencies and regional organizations. As it exists today, the trail network is a collection of early settlement trade routes, post-industrial abandoned railroads and connections between important open space and cultural attractions.

For more than 30 years, Active Transportation Alliance has worked to achieve the vision of a seamlessly connected, low-stress, equitable trail network that spans all areas of the region. Over this time, working alongside countless other leaders and partner organizations, we've seen great progress in the growth of our regional trail network.

Despite this tireless work, nearly 200 miles of gaps still exist along our major regional trails. Moreover, non-auto access to trails from communities continues to be a challenge and new projects often become bogged down by planning, funding and construction challenges. Gaps in the network and other challenges keep our trail system from achieving its full potential as a transportation and recreation asset that can yield health, economic and environmental benefits for the entire region.

Under a new campaign called Trail Connect Chicagoland, Active Trans will organize alongside residents and community leaders to close some of the largest remaining gaps in the trail network. This new campaign will also provide a platform to bring together key governmental stakeholders and grassroots trail advocates to work in unison to solve other problems within the network.

### **Trail Connect Chicagoland will work toward the following near-term and long-term goals:**

#### **Near-Term Goals (1–4 Years)**

- Adoption of plans to close approximately 43 miles of targeted trail gaps
- Commitment by relevant government stakeholders to funding and construction timelines on targeted gaps
- Start construction on Des Plaines River Trail and Lake Calumet area trail gaps
- Establishment of Regional Trail Coalition to coordinate trail advocacy and best practices
- Create network of hundreds of educated and well-resourced trail advocates throughout region

#### **Long-Term Goals (5–10 Years)**

- Complete construction on other initial targeted trail gaps, including I&M Trail Extension, Burnham Greenway and Northern Suburbs East-West Connections
- Start advocacy and planning work on other targeted gap areas in region that have been identified
- Work with councils of governments to create and implement trail plans to close roughly 145 miles of gaps remaining, with sustained funding
- Ensure all local communities adopt plans to prioritize trail access

To meet these goals, Active Trans is enacting four advocacy strategies, including:

- 1. Targeted Organizing on High Priority Gaps:** Our initial efforts will be focused around the Lake Calumet area, the northern expansion of the I&M Trail, the southern segment of the Des Plaines River Trail and east-west connections in the Northern Suburbs. Other targeted gap areas in the region will be identified as projects wrap up in the initial targeted areas.
- 2. Regional Coalition Building:** We will convene a regional coalition of trail advocates, governments and professional experts to work together toward achieving the vision of a seamlessly connected, low-stress, equitable trail network.
- 3. Grassroots Mobilizing:** We will build and sustain a regional network of educated and empowered trail advocates that can use advocacy tools and resources to identify and improve trails in and around their communities. This will entail hosting events throughout the region to bring awareness to local and regional trail gap issues, creating resources for members and supporters and building a base of trail advocates while ensuring they are successful in getting trails improved in and around their communities.
- 4. Decision Maker Engagement:** Our efforts to ensure elected officials and government agencies are actively and openly working on trail development projects with their residents.

Together, these strategies will team Active Trans with engaged local advocates to create a more comprehensive network of trails by closing gaps and by improving access to the new and existing trails. Trail Connect Chicagoland also aims to make sure trails are properly designed and maintained.

