

Trail Connect Chicagoland

Linking Our Regional Trails



ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION
ALLIANCE

INTRODUCTION



CMAP's I&M Trail Steering Committee kickoff meeting, April 20, 2018.

Since our founding in 1985 as the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, Active Transportation Alliance (Active Trans) has been working alongside community members and governmental agencies to push for better trails and more of them. Now with Trail Connect Chicagoland, our new advocacy campaign, we are taking our trail advocacy efforts to a new level, with more resources than ever before dedicated to ensuring success.

For decades, advocates throughout Chicagoland have pushed for trails in their communities and around the region. These leaders have understood that a comprehensive network of interconnected and accessible trails is not just an extra amenity for some, but a necessary asset that can improve quality of life for all. Since the first multi-use trails emerged in our region, thinking has shifted about the role they play in our communities, evolving from purely recreational facilities into integral parts of our transportation networks and economic development strategies.

Despite this growing awareness of the myriad benefits trails can provide, the regional network of trails in Northeastern Illinois is failing to serve the needs of most residents. Too often, existing trails are inaccessible, offering stressful and dangerous crossings at busy streets. These existing trails often fail to connect to other trails and key destinations.

Trail Connect Chicagoland will lay the foundation for overcoming these obstacles, and will be guided by our ultimate goal of a well-connected seamless, low-stress and equitable regional trail network that makes it easy for every Chicagoland resident to walk and bike for transportation and recreation.

We will spearhead trail advocacy efforts around the region, mobilizing residents and providing them with the tools and education needed to successfully push for removing gaps and accessibility issues in the trail network in their communities and across Northeastern Illinois.

QUESTIONS WE'LL SEEK TO ANSWER

In this comprehensive vision plan, we'll seek to answer the following questions:

1

Why are trails an important public priority?

2

What does the regional network currently look like?

3

What is our vision for the regional trail network?

4

How will the Trail Connect Chicagoland campaign help make that vision a reality?

For those areas of the region where gaps exist and where trail development is much needed, Active Trans' resources and organizing expertise will be critical to success. As such, Active Trans staff will engage in targeted local organizing to develop plans and push projects through to construction.

Trail Connect Chicagoland will also help proactive officials and agencies by building intergovernmental coalitions where leaders can address shared planning, funding and construction challenges, discuss best practice examples, connect with local and regional advocates, and promote their successful projects.

With these objectives in mind, the Trail Connect Chicagoland campaign will help build a safe, expansive and accessible regional trail network, and one that can be enjoyed by all types of users from all over the region. As more projects are completed, as more coalitions are formed and as more advocates are educated, the campaign will evolve to identify different areas throughout the region to target with direct advocacy support. Trail Connect Chicagoland is inspired by the our vision of a seamlessly connected network where people can move safely through the region while enjoying access to nature.

DEFINING A TRAIL

For the purposes of this vision plan, when discussing what a "trail" is, we're referring to a well-defined and maintained path running through publicly-accessible recreational space, except when an alternative on-street route for the path is provided on a protected bike lane, a striped bike lane, a side path, or with on-street trail if wayfinding signs are provided. These trails are intended to serve those who are interested in using them for walking, running and biking for transportation and recreational purposes.



Regional Trail Coalition: Kickoff meeting, March 22, 2018.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TRAILS

- The Wisconsin bicycle industry brings \$556 million and 3,420 jobs to the state. (Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Department of Transportation)
- Trails in the Miami Valley of Ohio attract about 90,000 visitors who spend \$13 million on goods and services every year. (Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission, 2013)
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection Office of Greenways & Trails estimates an economic benefit of \$2.2 million annually from the 16-mile St. Marks Trail. (Danzer, R., 2006)
- In Dallas, developers report that there is a 25 percent premium for properties adjacent to the Katy Trail. (Brown, S., 2006)

Why are trails an important public priority?

Active Trans' mission is to promote walking, biking and public transit to create healthy, sustainable and equitable communities. Trails encourage more people to walk and bike for transportation by providing community residents with an inexpensive and low-stress transportation corridor.

Beyond their role as transportation corridors, trails also provide a number of other benefits for communities like enhancing the environment, contributing to improved public health and driving local economic development.

Since trails provide low-stress environments that encourage people to walk and bike as everyday transportation, a well-connected and well-designed trail network can be used by any group of residents regardless of age, socioeconomic status or one's physical abilities. By linking the benefits of trails to people and communities most in need of these benefits, trails can be an engine for creating a more equitable region.

What does the regional network currently look like?

More than 1,100 miles of trails currently exist in Chicagoland — the seven-county area of Northeastern Illinois. These many miles of trails are due in no small part to the tireless efforts of trail advocates, local businesses and organizations, elected officials and government agencies at all levels, from federal agencies like the National Park Service, to state agencies like the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, to local units of government like county departments of transportation and individual mayors and municipalities. Additionally, some of the region's most prominent trails, including the Centennial Trail, are a result of large land-holding governmental agencies partnering with local or regional organizations to allow trails to be accessible through their property. It's these partnerships and the accompanying hard work that has allowed so many of the region's trail to be constructed.

Over the past decade, the planners at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) meticulously identified, documented and tracked improvements in the area's existing trail network. As part of its Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways and Trails Plan, they also identified another 1,600 miles of potential trails throughout Chicagoland. We'll use this resource as well as feedback we gather from trail advocates from around the region to identify and discuss trail development opportunities.

Despite the impressive number of trail miles in Northeastern Illinois, the network faces significant challenges, including a lack of connectivity, inaccessible trailheads, dangerous crossings and poor trail conditions. There are nearly 200 miles of trail gaps already identified in the system, a great number of trailheads that are only accessible by car and not by bicycle or public transportation, and a handful of prominent trails exist where trail users are forced to cross dangerous arterial roads or railroads to continue on their journey. As trails become more of a desirable commodity, the number of users will increase exponentially, making it a necessity to solve these challenges now.

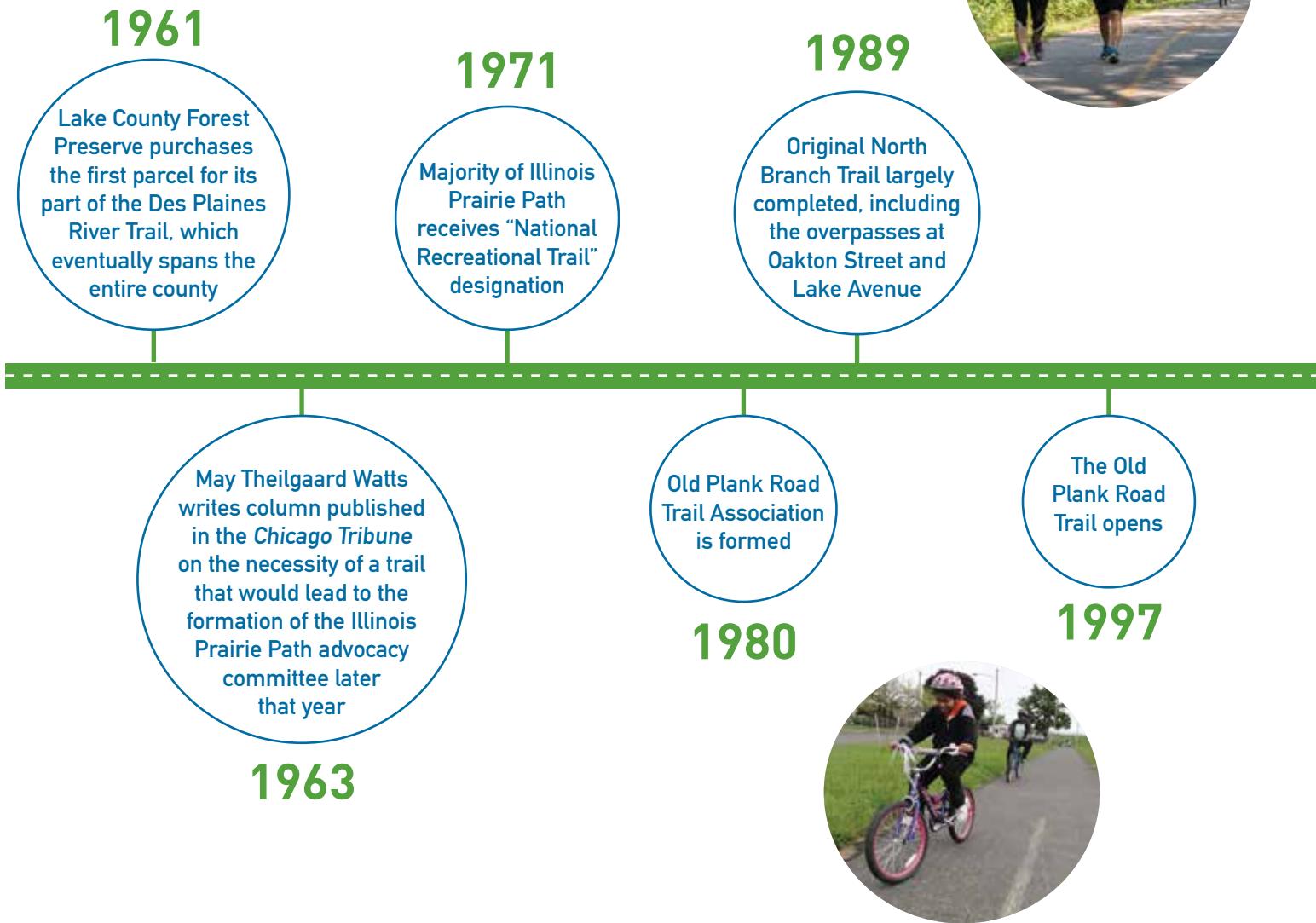
What is our vision for the regional trail network?

Active Transportation Alliance envisions a seamless, low-stress and equitable system of trails that expands on the current system to serve all communities. Much like our street and rail networks, we want the regional trail network to serve as a transportation system for pedestrians and bicyclists to use for all types of trips, while providing them access to open space and recreation.



MILESTONES FOR LOCAL TRAILS

The process of building and improving trails in Chicagoland has been happening in the region for decades. Here are a few important milestones.



In addition to the individual municipalities' or trail's engineering and planning documents, here are other regional trail plans we recommend reviewing:

- Chicago River Trail Action Plan, Active Transportation Alliance
- City of Chicago's Streets for Cycling Plan 2020, Chicago Department of Transportation
- DuPage County Regional Bike Plan
- Illinois Bike Transportation Plan
- Kane County Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan
- Kendall County Trails & Greenways Plan
- Lake County 2040 Transportation Plan
- McHenry County 2030 Comprehensive Plan
- Northeastern Illinois Regional Greenways and Trails Plan, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning
- Northwest Municipal Conference Bicycle Plan
- Our Great Rivers, Metropolitan Planning Council
- Trail Master Plan, Forest Preserve District of Cook County
- Will County Bikeway Plan

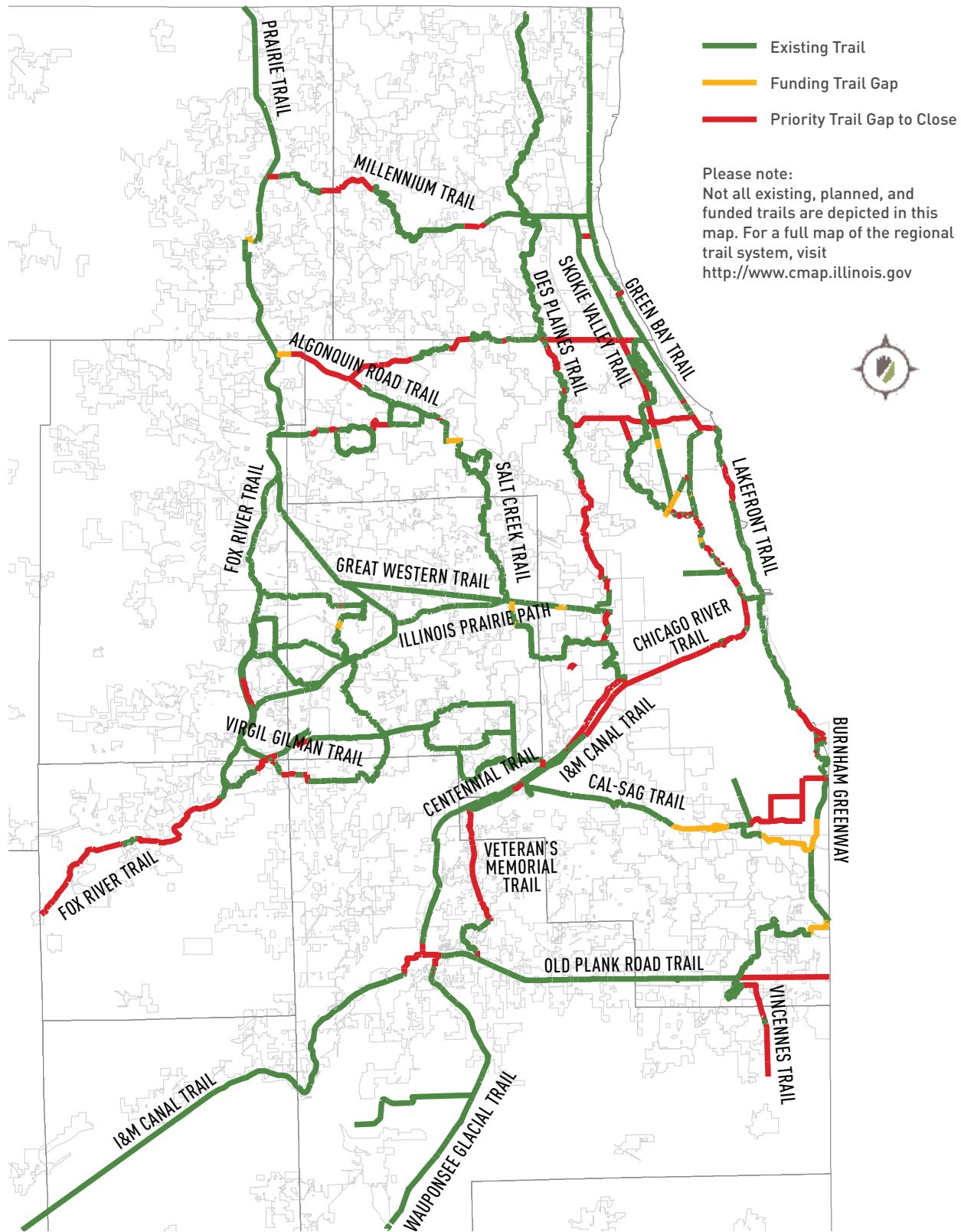


HEALTH BENEFITS OF TRAILS:

- A San Francisco Bay Area study found that increasing biking and walking from 4 to 24 minutes a day on average would reduce cardiovascular disease and diabetes by 14 percent. (Maizlish, N. et al, 2012)
- The Indiana Trails Study, which surveyed trail users on six different trails in Indiana, found that in all six locations, more than 70 percent of trail users reported that they were getting more exercise as a direct result of the trail. (Indiana University, 2001)
- A report estimated that Portland, Oregon's regional trail network saves the city approximately \$115 million per year in healthcare costs. (Beil, K., 2011)

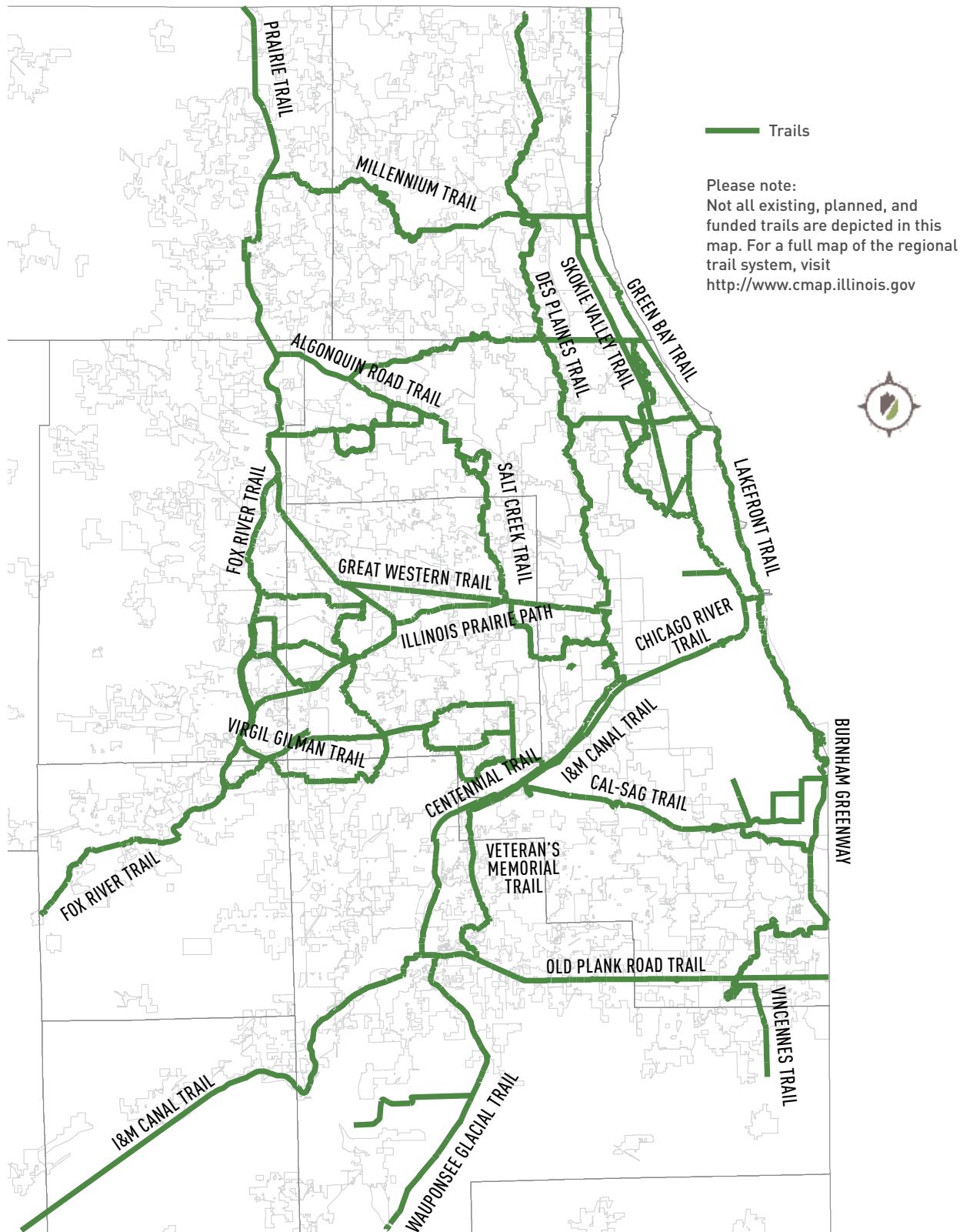
Trail Connect Chicagoland

OUR EXISTING NETWORK AND ITS GAPS



Trail Connect Chicagoland

OUR VISION FOR A CONNECTED NETWORK



TRAIL CONNECT CHICAGOLAND PRINCIPLES

- **Seamless:** Our trail network should be seamless, providing a continuous and intuitively connected experience throughout the entire system. Trails should be easily accessible from residential areas, employment centers, schools, recreational open space and other key destinations. Communities will ensure high-quality pedestrian and bicycles facilities and provide easy access to and from the trail network.
- **Low-Stress:** Trails should be designed in a manner that ensures that all users feel safe and comfortable while using them. That means providing adequate space for different types of users to share the trail safely, which includes providing separate walking and biking trails in high-volume areas. Trails should be well-lit and free from debris, snow and ice. Amenities like water fountains and restrooms should be readily accessible throughout the network.
- **Equitable:** The trail network should serve all communities equally and trail design should emphasize accessibility for all users. Trail development planning and construction should be prioritized in areas that are currently underserved by trails and/or stand to benefit the most from trail improvements.

Removing existing trail gaps and providing better access to trails would allow people to move more safely through the region, while enjoying access to nature and engaging in healthy activity. A comprehensive trail network would serve as an economic engine for the region, allowing Chicagoland residents and tourists to explore the area and venture into communities near and far to shop in stores, relax in parks and visit cultural attractions. Access to nature by way of a safe transportation system should be an amenity for all Chicagoland residents. Communities could save on health care costs when residents have easy access to trails where they can walk, bike and run. And the social opportunities for families, colleagues and friends, created by having a high quality trail system, are endless. As the system expands, more communities will likely invest in connecting themselves to the trails, and, in turn, improve their pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in the process to the benefit of all residents.

To make the vision of a comprehensive and accessible regional trail network a reality, Active Transportation Alliance launched the Trail Connect Chicagoland campaign. With the help of community residents and advocates, elected officials, government agencies, local businesses and regional organizations, this campaign is a long-term effort for Active Trans — assisting advocates and local governments as they seek improvements to the trails in and around their communities.

How will the Trail Connect Chicagoland campaign help make that vision a reality?

In order to achieve the vision set forth in this plan, we 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 the 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



PHOTO: Will County Forest Preserve District

To make these goals happen, we believe that there are four key advocacy strategies that the campaign must focus on:

- **Targeted Organizing on High Priority Gaps:** Lead organizing and advocacy on a handful of targeted trail gap areas.
- **Regional Coalition Building:** Build a regional trail coalition of advocates, governments and professional experts to coordinate advocacy, professional development and information sharing in pursuit of the Trail Connect Chicagoland vision.
- **Grassroots Mobilizing:** Build and sustain a network of educated and empowered trail advocates throughout the region. This will include 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.
- **Decision Maker Engagement:** Ensure elected officials and government agencies throughout the region are openly communicating about and actively working on trail development projects.

ACTION STEPS TO GET INVOLVED IN THE TRAIL CONNECT CHICAGOLAND CAMPAIGN:

- **Support the Trail Connect Chicagoland campaign at bit.ly/trailconnect.**
- **Send a letter to your local government encouraging them to endorse the campaign and build better trails in and around your community.**
- **Participate in the Regional Trail Coalition.**
- **Get involved in Targeted Trail Gap organizing.**

ACTION STEPS TO IMPROVE TRAIL GAPS IN YOUR COMMUNITY:

- **Start community coalitions and build support for your project(s).**
- **Learn from Active Trans on how to expand your advocacy toolbox.**
- **Get to know your elected officials and start discussions with them on how to improve trails in your community.**



PHOTO: Will County Forest Preserve District

Strategy #1: Lead organizing efforts on targeted trail gaps

Active Trans has been engaged for years in grassroots advocacy to help fill in gaps in the regional trail network. As part of the Trail Connect Chicagoland campaign, Active Trans will expand our ongoing advocacy efforts in these targeted areas by convening localized coalitions of governmental stakeholders and grassroots advocates and working with those groups to identify and execute action steps to move trail development projects forward.

Our four initial targeted gap areas include:

- The Lake Calumet region
- The I&M Trail extension
- The southern segment of the Des Plaines River Trail in Central Cook County
- East-west connections in the Northern Cook County suburbs

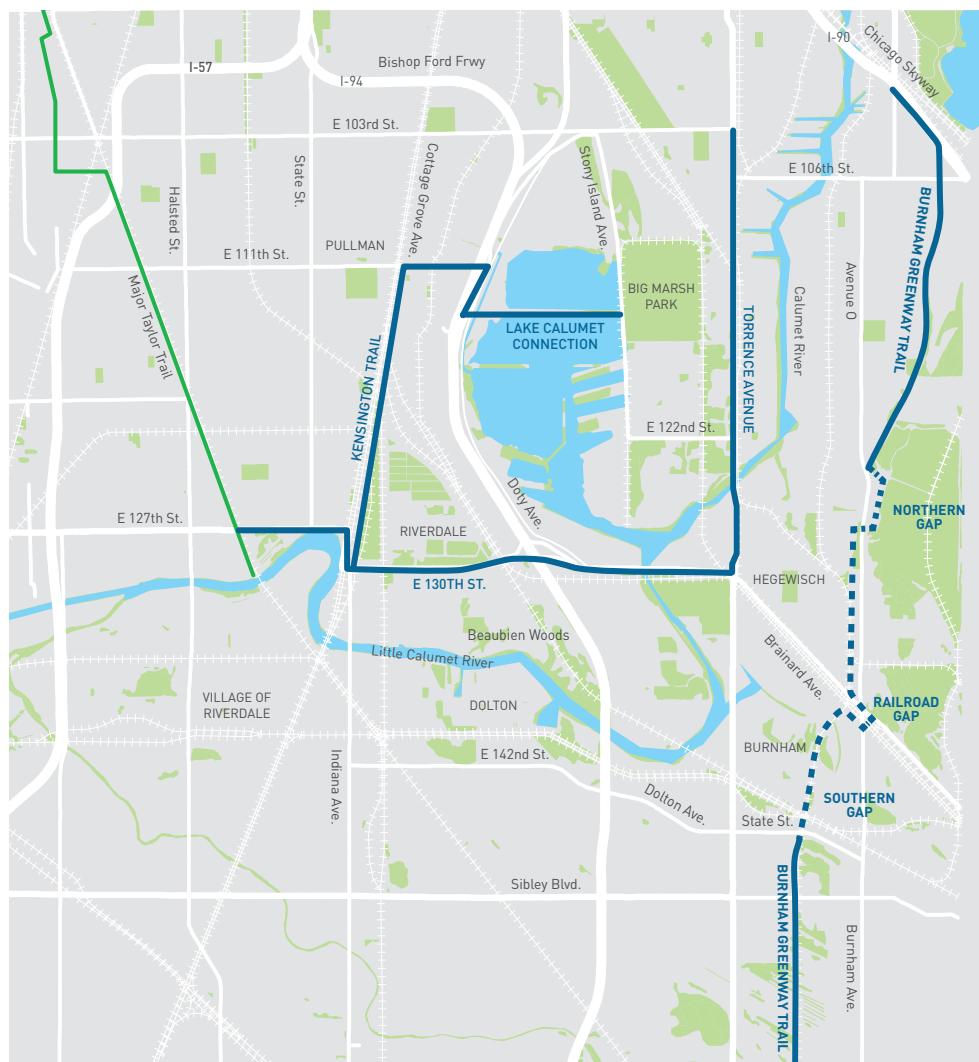
Each target area is unique, and the action steps required to make progress will likewise be different, running the gamut from grassroots organizing to getting attention from decision makers to working side-by-side with governments to help coordinate planning, fundraising and launching construction.

For all four initial target areas, it is our short-term goal (1-4 years) to ensure that our coalitions have identified priority projects, formalized their efforts, hosted public meetings and fundraising events, and worked with government entities to ensure planning and engineering efforts are concluded. In the case of some target areas (the Des Plaines River Trail and the Lake Calumet area), it is our goal for construction to begin on those trail projects and then ensure the trails are well-maintained.

In 5-10 years, our goal is to ensure that construction has finished on all major projects the target area coalitions have identified. That means gaps have been removed and accessibility has been created for new and existing trails. Further, as initial target area projects wrap up and as new targeted gap areas are identified, we'll work with grassroots advocates and governmental entities to begin organizing, performing outreach and pursuing planning efforts for those new targeted gap areas.



LAKE CALUMET AREA MAP

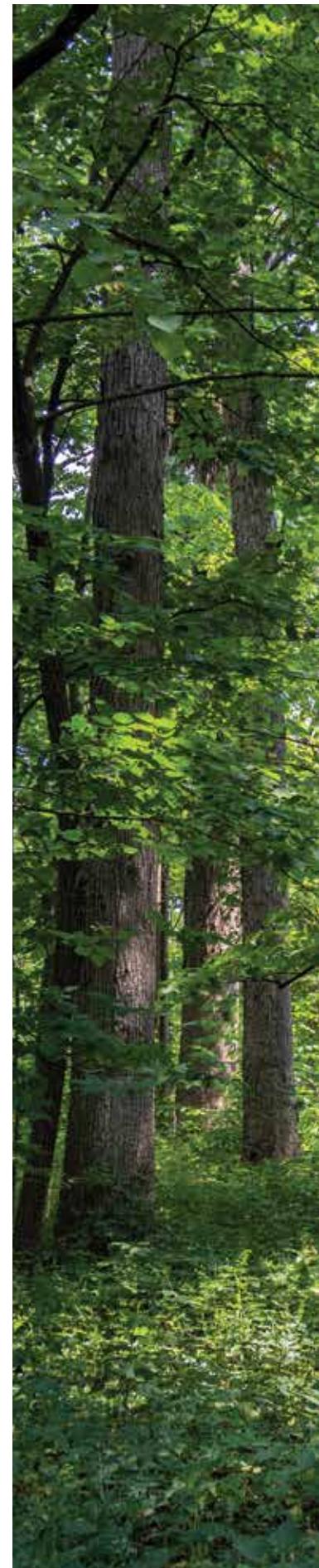


LAKE CALUMET AREA

The Lake Calumet region on Chicago's Far South Side boasts a rich industrial, cultural and environmental history and is home to a unique mix of economic, ecological and community assets. In recent decades, the communities around the Lake Calumet area have been dealing with several vexing problems, including industrial pollution in the air and waterways, depopulation and economic depreciation, the loss of manufacturing jobs and a lack of community connectivity. Recent efforts by the Chicago Park District and others to transform former industrial sites into a new green belt of parks and open spaces present an exciting opportunity to revitalize the region. Active Trans has been active on the Far South Side and in near South Suburbs for years, but most recently, our work has focused on advocating for better walking, biking and public transit access between new and existing destinations in the Lake Calumet area.

To accomplish our short-term goals, we are working with a group of dedicated grassroots advocates to advance the following projects to create an integrated trail network in the area:

- Lake Calumet Connection: Working through public agencies, Active Trans is spearheading an effort to seek state and federal funds to engineer and build a trail connection across or around Lake Calumet between Pullman and Big Marsh Park.



- Kensington Trail: By getting support from regional and local government agencies, Active Trans is negotiating the logistics of building and managing a trail through former industrial land to connect the communities of Pullman and Altgeld Gardens.
- Burnham Greenway Gap: Active Trans is aiding other local organizations in efforts to finish the decades-long work to close the last two miles of the Burnham Greenway in the city of Chicago and the neighboring town of Burnham, Illinois.

I&M TRAIL EXTENSION

The historic I&M Canal played a key role in Chicago becoming the economic capital of the Midwest by connecting Chicago to the Illinois River, the Mississippi River and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico. Now it's slowly becoming an vital corridor for biking and walking. There is a segment of this trail, from Willow Springs to the Portage Historic Site at Harlem Avenue, where a significant gap currently exists. Some of the land is owned by local industrial companies that are unwelcoming to trail users because of the nature of their business. Given these constraints, our short-term project goals are to:

- Continue supporting local government efforts in advancing planning and engineering work to determine trail routes, while identifying funding options and encouraging collaboration across jurisdictions.
- Working directly with local leadership to develop a strong base of trail advocates to help organize and mobilize around supporting trail expansion efforts.



From left: Franklin Park Mayor Barrett Pedersen, Cook County Commissioner Peter Silvestri (9th District) and River Grove Mayor David Guerin at the Des Plaines River Trail kickoff meeting in early 2018.



SOUTHERN SEGMENT OF THE DES PLAINES RIVER TRAIL IN CENTRAL COOK COUNTY

The Des Plaines River Trail is one of the most prestigious and well-traveled trails in the Chicagoland region. However, the southern segment of the trail, between Touhy Avenue and North Avenue, has significant connectivity and access issues. Users of the trail often have to either dodge busy traffic to cross major streets or find alternative routes due to flooding at underpasses. With the help of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and their ongoing engineering efforts, Active Trans has identified the following short-term project goals:

- Build an intergovernmental coalition of elected officials, including Cook County Commissioners and mayors of adjacent communities, municipal government representatives, engineers and planners who can help determine improvements for this segment of the trail. We will identify funding opportunities, and work through logistical issues to ensure trail improvement construction efforts get underway.
- Create a grassroots, community-led coalition to advance the recommendations of the engineering efforts. We will bring awareness to the conditions of the trail, host public events and fundraisers to gather community and monetary support for the improvements, and educate area residents about the history of the trail.

NORTHERN SUBURBS

The final targeted area the campaign will focus on exploring trail connectivity in and around the Northern Suburbs of Cook County, including the communities of Evanston, Skokie, Lincolnwood, Morton Grove and Wilmette, among others. While this geographic area is lucky to have three great north-south trails — the Green Bay, Skokie Valley and North Shore Channel Trails — there are no safe east-west access options to these trails. Access to these trails often comes by means of dangerous on-street routes. For this target area, Active Trans' short-term goals are to:

- Assemble a coalition of dedicated trail advocates to assess and advocate for the most ideal routes for accessing existing trails through a public outreach campaign.
- Partner with local municipalities and regional agencies to address trail access opportunities and move forward with planning and engineering efforts.

As the Trail Connect Chicagoland campaign continues to evolve and as coalitions are launched and trail projects completed in these four target areas, Active Trans will look elsewhere throughout the region to determine other significant areas of the region to prioritize coalition-building efforts for trail connectivity improvements. New geographical target areas must be where local coalition-building resources are needed and the projects must dovetail with our organization's mission, particularly our equity and sustainability aims.

By closing the trail gaps in the four targeted areas, an additional 10 percent of the Chicagoland population living below the poverty level will have access to trails, according to data from the US Census Bureau and Chicago Metropolitan Planning Agency.





Strategy #2: Build Regional Trail Coalition to coordinate and mobilize advocates, government and businesses

The complexity and scale of trail development projects require advocates, government agencies and professional planners and engineers working in coordination to advance shared goals. In order to create a forum for this coordination to take place, Active Trans is convening a Regional Trail Coalition. The coalition will meet quarterly and provide a diverse group of stakeholders with a setting to develop a shared advocacy strategy, build knowledge and skills, share relevant information across sectors, and push to advance trail updates throughout the region. Topics the coalition will address will evolve as the campaign shifts its focus on different trail improvement priorities and target areas.



Village of Summit's Boat Launch Charrette—part of I&M Trail extension project.

Strategy #3: Build a network of grassroots trail advocates

Active Transportation Alliance's role as an advocacy organization is to empower grassroots advocates to make changes in and around their communities. As such, it is imperative that we develop a large network of members and supporters interested in advocating for trail development. To accomplish this, we will create opportunities for advocates throughout the region to come together to:

- Identify existing trail gaps and trail opportunities in and around their communities.
- Discuss common problems and successful methods for getting trails built or improved.
- Advocate across communities on regional projects, plans and policies that support trail development.

Our hope is that this network will provide a forum to develop and launch localized campaigns led by dedicated advocates. To support these local

campaigns, Active Trans will host annual regional summits and local networking opportunities, for advocates to meet, organize and push projects forward.

Further, to assist grassroots advocates, Active Trans will create a toolbox of resources that advocates will have access to and help them determine how to identify a trail gap, understand why that gap exists, create a plan for marketing and coalition-building to bring awareness and a supported effort to address that issue, and reach out to the right government officials, agencies and funders to eliminate those gaps.

Strategy #4: Ensure elected officials and government agencies coordinate and implement trail development projects

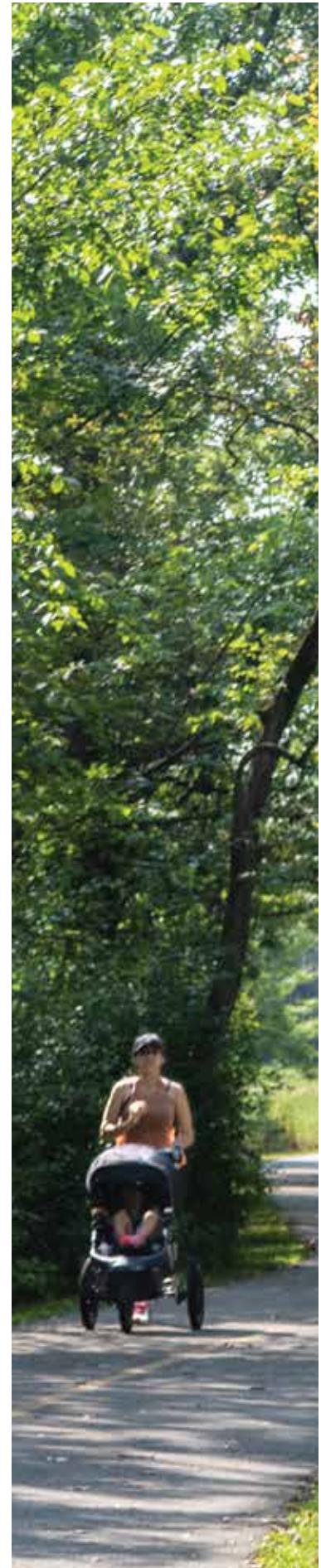
Trails are one of the most desired community amenities and, as noted above, provide communities with myriad health, economic and environmental benefits. While encouraging trail development is clearly smart public policy, implementing these projects is often challenging and difficult for local and regional governments. Resources for planning and construction are scarce. Trail corridors often crisscross multiple jurisdictions, as well as privately held land, industrial areas, or environmentally sensitive spaces. Given these challenges, it is essential for government units to coordinate the development and support the implementation of trail projects.

Given the feedback we've received from our members and supporters, we have identified the following action steps for local governments to take:

- Listen to and work with their residents' requests for better trails in and around their community.
- Set aside recurring funding in their capital budgets for trail improvements.
- Adopt complete streets policies and active transportation plans at the community level to make trail access safer and more enjoyable for residents.
- Lead the effort in working with other communities to create or institute regional plans or policies for better trail access and connectivity.
- Develop interjurisdictional agreements with adjacent municipalities to ensure trail development across communities is followed through.
- Continue to apply for state and federal grants for trail improvement projects in your community.

Additionally, there are other ways Active Trans intends to actively support municipal governments and regional agencies. We'll help to promote pragmatic best practice solutions, from wayfinding plans, trail rules, trail ambassador programs, and online interactive maps showing trail locations, user amenities, and nearby businesses, that individual municipalities, government agencies and local organizations can work toward creating and implementing. Working with the regional trail coalition, we'll assemble a database of best practice case studies that governmental stakeholders can use as guidelines to improve trails in and around their communities.

Through our non-partisan electoral and legislative advocacy, Active Trans is pushing for federal, state and local legislation to ensure adequate resources for trail development are prioritized by elected officials. By ensuring the conversation is continuing, government entities can have a more open dialogue with their constituents.



NEXT STEPS

This regional trail vision plan is a working document that will evolve as the Trail Connect Chicagoland campaign evolves, as different target areas and trail projects emerge and as identified projects wrap up. But a few objectives will be constantly present as we work toward a more accessible and better-connected trail network.

We will be:

- Engaging, educating and developing trail advocates.
- Ensuring that municipalities and regional government bodies push for trail improvements in their communities and throughout the region.
- Building coalitions in parts of the region where trail development is much needed and where our resources and support can serve as critical elements.

We look forward to working with enthusiastic advocates, proactive elected officials and government agencies to improve our regional trail network now and in the years to come!



PHOTO: Will County Forest Preserve District



THANKS TO

Active Trans thanks leaders from the following civic and community organizations that provided feedback on this report and agreed to work together to push for implementation of its recommendations.

FUNDING SPONSOR



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VISION PLAN PARTNERS



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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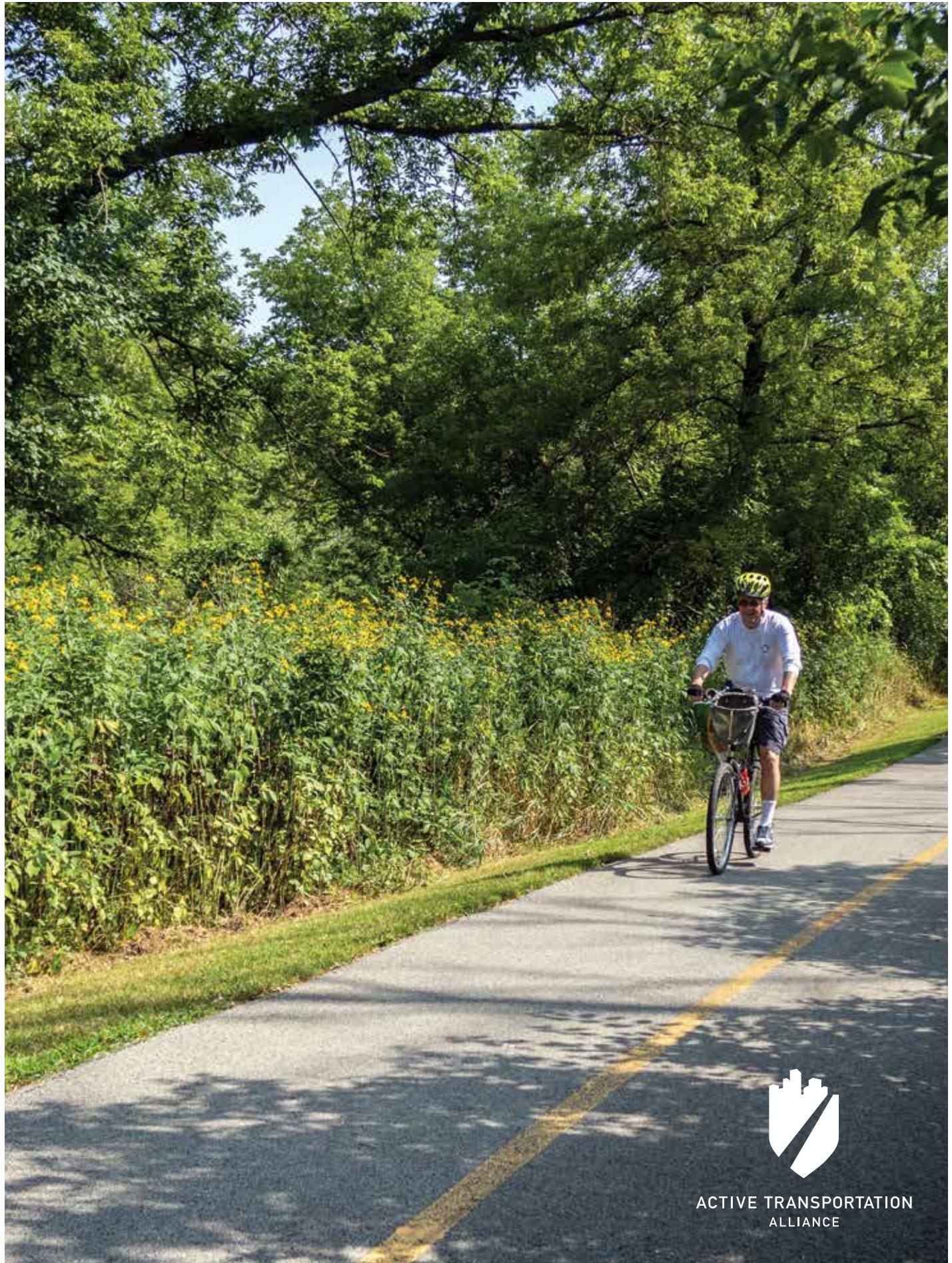
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