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Full Existing Conditions Report

OLD PLANK ROAD TRAIL Extension Feasibility Study

Existing Conditions Report

AUGUST 2023

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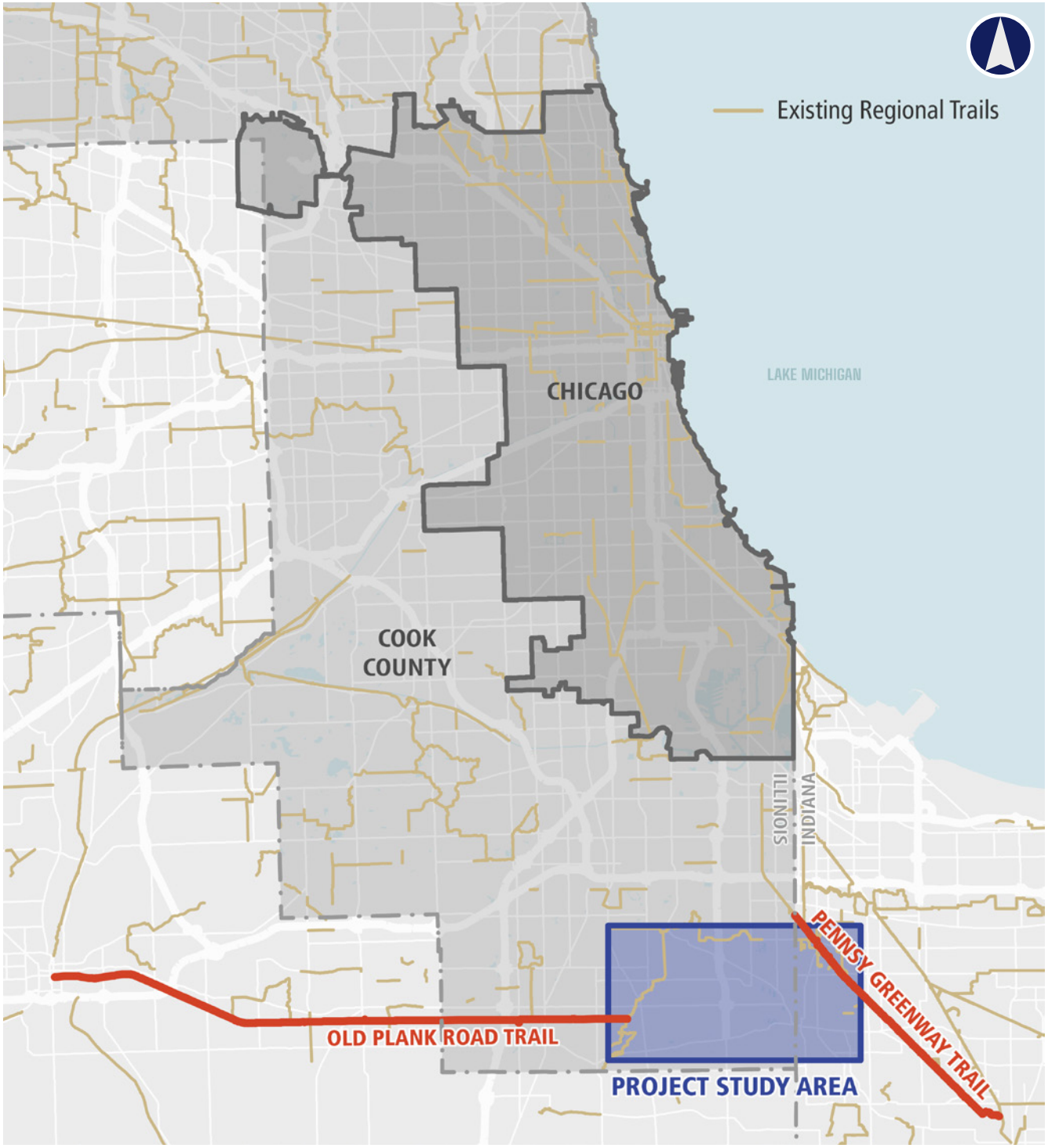
Study Area Overview

Study Overview

The purpose of the Old Plank Road Trail Extension Feasibility Study is to identify and assess the feasibility of a connection between the existing eastern terminus of the Old Plank Road Trail (OPRT), at the Thorn Creek Trail in Chicago Heights, Illinois, and the Pennsy Greenway in Schererville, Indiana.

Study Goals

- Identify a preferred trail alignment that is safe, feasible, cost-effective, and consistent with community input and preferences.
- Increase walking and biking connectivity between community destinations and the future OPRT extension.
- Increase awareness of the existing OPRT, share community benefits of a trail extension and Trail-Oriented Development, and receive robust community input.
- Provide a turn-key implementation strategy that study area agencies can use to move the project forward, aligning near and mid-term actions with available financial resources.



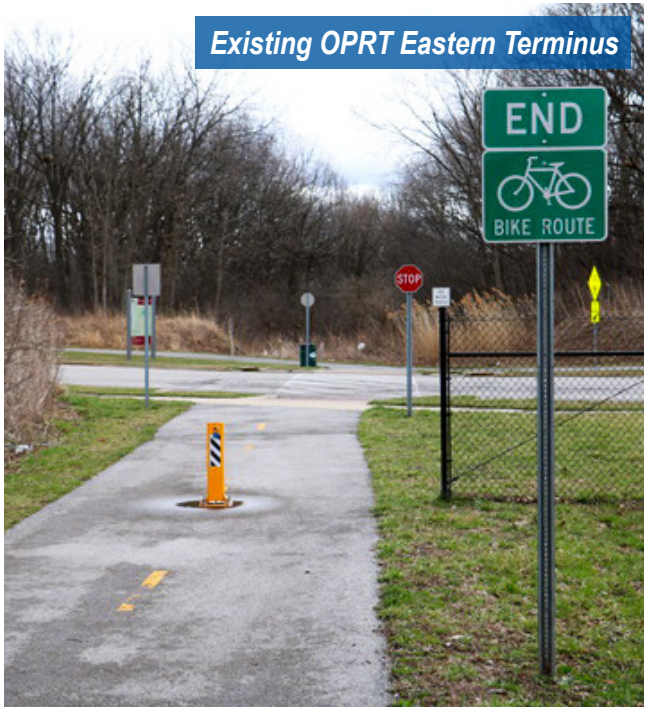
Community Benefits

Once completed, this bi-state trail connection will bridge a critical gap in the regional trail system, connect residents and visitors to key destinations, and help to realize a larger vision aimed at revitalizing the Chicago Southland and supporting active, safe, and healthy communities across the Calumet region.

The benefits of this regional project are far-reaching and include public health, economic, and transportation benefits, as well as positive effects on community pride and identity. A comprehensive trail network would serve as an economic engine for the region, allowing 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.

The OPRT extension will meet the Pennsy Greenway, which connects north to the Burnham Greenway, Cal-Sag and Lakefront Trails, and Chicago. The trail will also connect to the new Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) West Lake Corridor Project, which will provide a vital transportation link between Chicago, Cook County, and northwest Indiana.

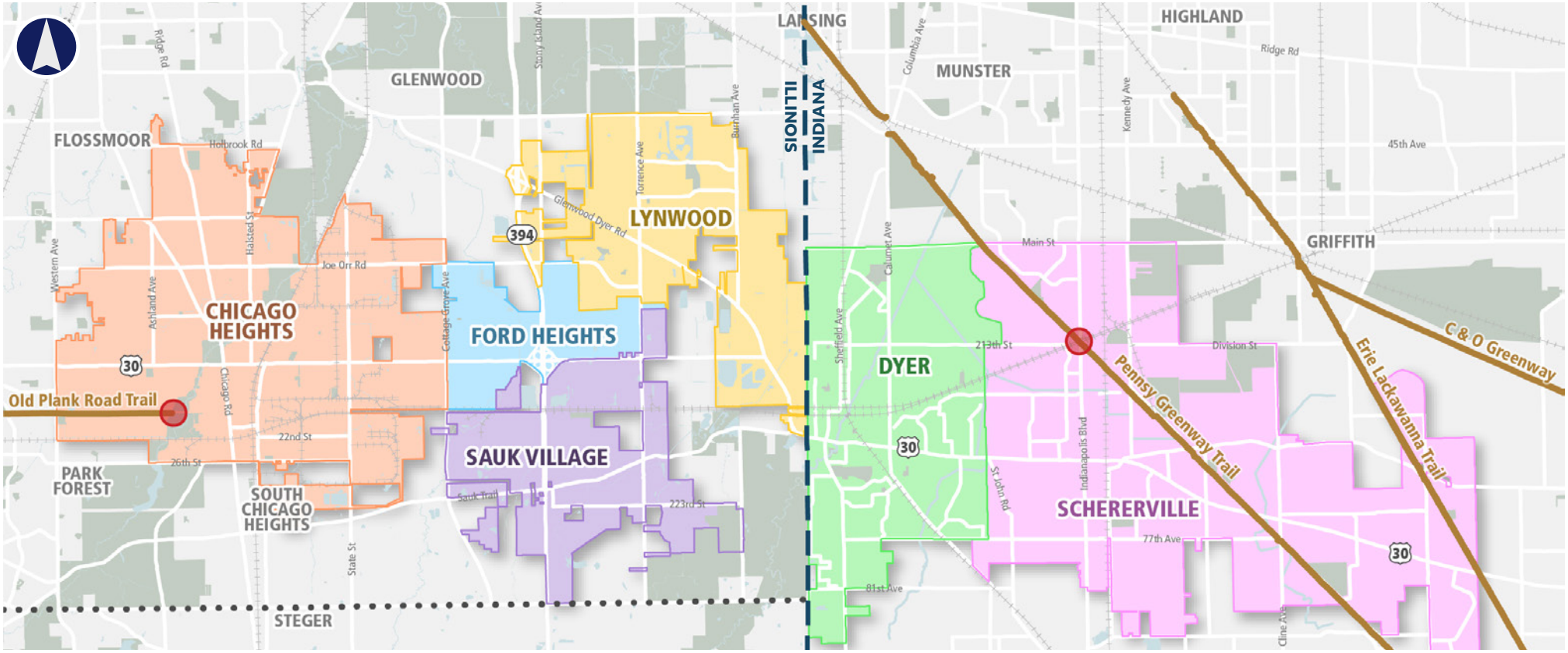

Potential Inactive Rail Alignment



Existing OPRT Eastern Terminus


Pennsy Greenway

Study Overview
Project Partner Communities



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

The project partners include six municipalities (Chicago Heights, Ford Heights, Sauk Village, Lynwood, Dyer, and Schererville), the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association (SSMMA), the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC), Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways, the Forest Preserves of Cook and Will Counties, Openlands, and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP).

Existing Transportation Network

Regional Connectivity
Bike Facilities

- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

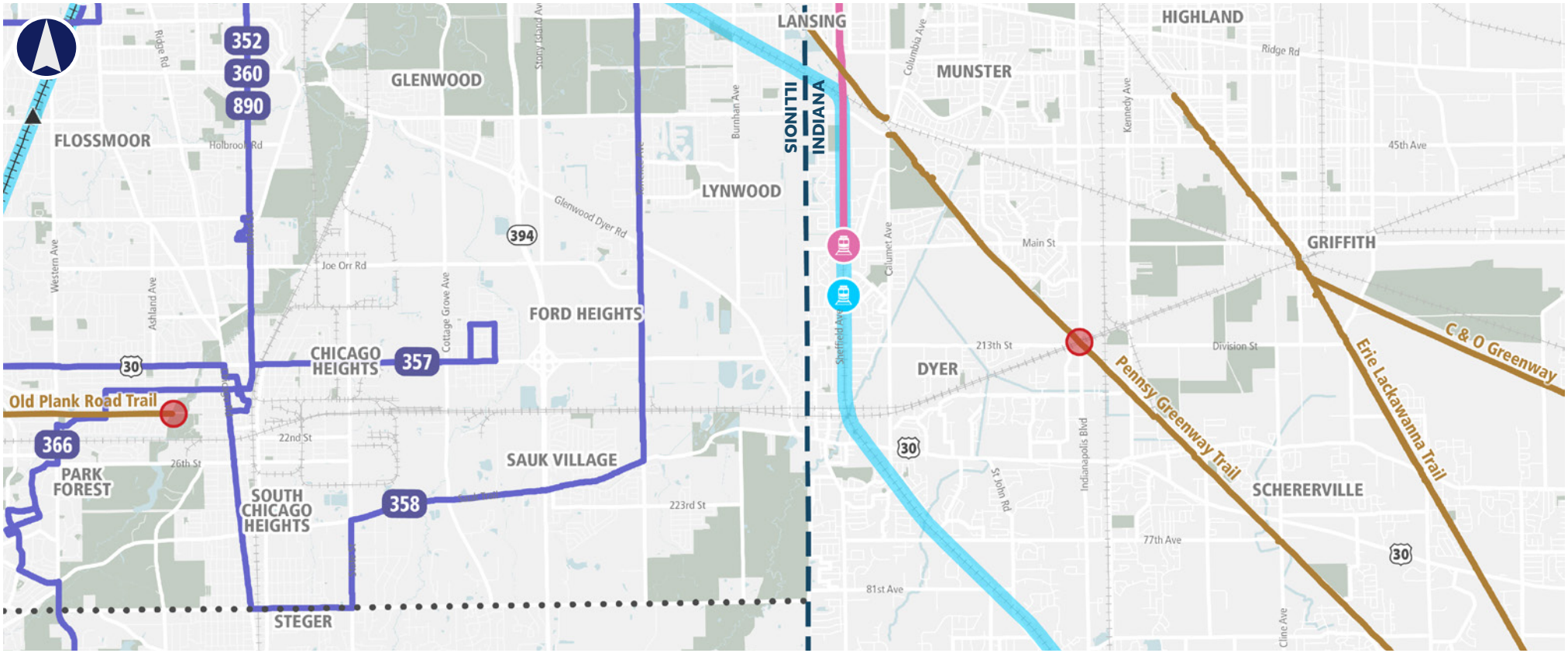
Bike Facilities

- Existing Path or Trail
- Existing Protected Bike Lane
- Existing Bike Lane
- Existing Sidepath
- Existing Bike Route
- Future Path or Trail
- Future Protected Bike Lane
- Future Bike Lane
- Future Sidepath
- Future Bike Route

Several existing regional trails and local bike facilities exist in the study area, however this area is generally void of any solid bike connectivity. Many of the municipalities have developed standalone bike plans or comprehensive plans that lay out goals to implement various types of bike facilities to increase connectivity and create greater access for residents and visitors to and from their communities. Sidepaths and trails are the predominant bike facilities recommended.

Cook County also recently completed its first-ever Bike Plan, which includes the OPRT trail extension. Their commitment and priority to improve biking in this study area can further enhance opportunities to connect to and from the future OPRT trail alignment.

Regional Connectivity
Transit



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

Transit

- Pace Bus Route
- Metra Rail Line and Station
- Amtrak Rail Line and Station

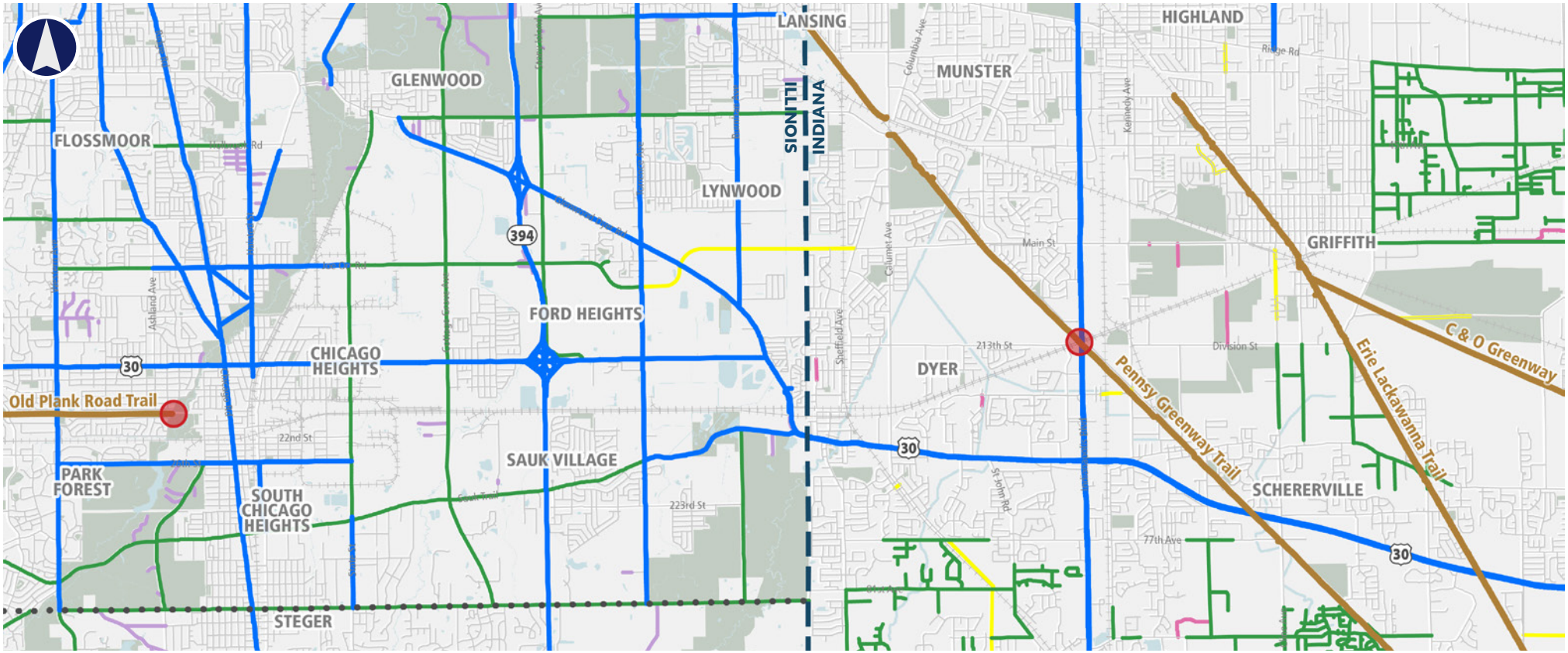
Proposed South Shore Line Rail Extension

- Westlake Corridor Rail Line
- Westlake Corridor Stations

Pace operates a few routes in Illinois. These six routes include both local, fixed services and limited-stop services. The COVID-19 pandemic caused one route to be eliminated (Route 372: Dixie Highway).

Along with Amtrak passenger rail service, primarily serving the Indiana side of the study area, the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) is proposing the West Lake Corridor Project as a southern branch extension of the existing South Shore Line (SSL) to reach high-growth areas in Lake County, Indiana and ultimately connect to the Metra Electric District (MED) line which serves Millennium Station in downtown Chicago. The plan includes a stop in Dyer, IN.

Transportation Characteristics
Roadway Jurisdiction



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

Jurisdiction

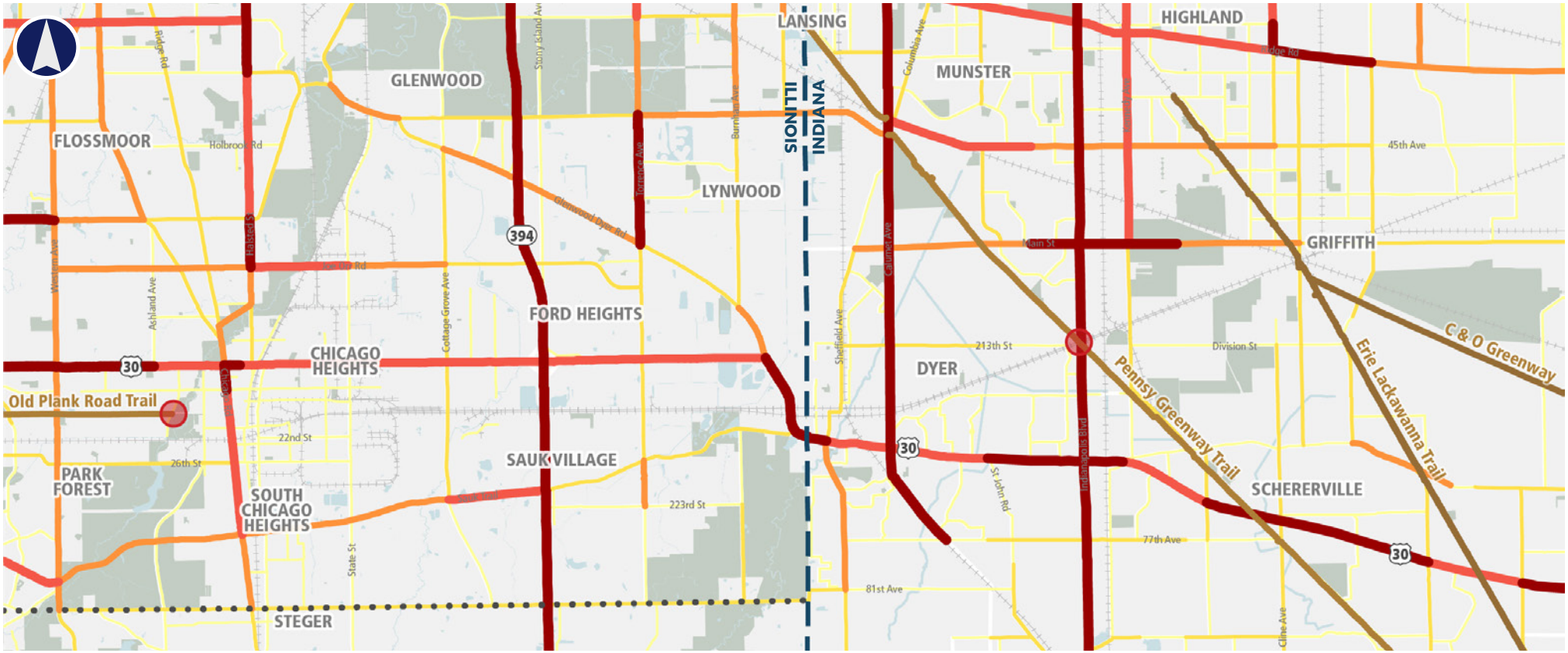
- IDOT / InDOT
- County
- Township / Road District
- Municipality
- Proposed Roadway
- Other

Several key roadways in the study area are under the jurisdiction of State DOTs or the County, so additional coordination will likely be required with these agencies once the preferred alignment is selected.

IDOT / InDOT: State DOTs have jurisdiction over some of the more major arterials and collectors in the study area. The east-west roadways include IL 30/Lincoln Highway and Glenwood Dyer Rd. The north-south roadways include IL 394, Chicago Rd, Torrence Ave, and Indianapolis Blvd.

County: In Illinois, Cook County DoTH controls some key corridors as well including: Joe Orr Rd, Sauk Trail, State St, and Cottage Grove Ave. In Indiana, Lake County does not have jurisdiction over many major throughways in the study area.

Transportation Characteristics
Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT)



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

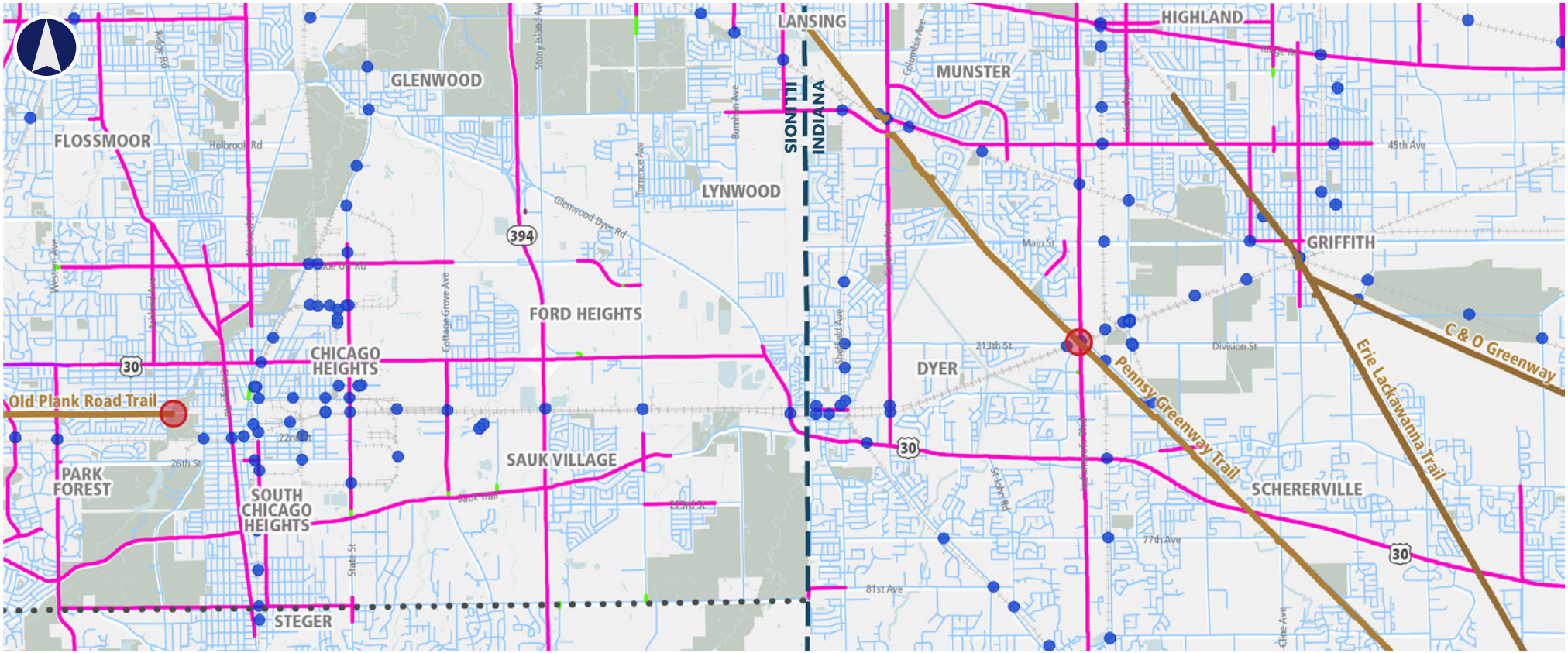
Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT)

- 1 to 4,999
- 5,000 to 9,999
- 10,000 to 14,999
- 15,000 to 19,999
- 20,000 or more

As expected, the major throughway corridors experience higher vehicular traffic volumes. The more notable roadways that carry the greatest traffic volumes are IL 394, IL 30 / Lincoln Highway, State St, Calumet Ave, and Indianapolis Blvd. The east-west freight corridor does intersect with several of these busier roadways. While IL 394 and Lincoln Highway already have underpasses in place, alignment options that travel across Chicago Rd, Cottage Grove Ave, and Calumet Ave, all of which are wider roads with multiple travel lanes, will need extra design considerations to ensure a safe and comfortable crossing experience for future trail users.

Transportation Characteristics

Number of Travel Lanes and At-Grade Railroad Crossings



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

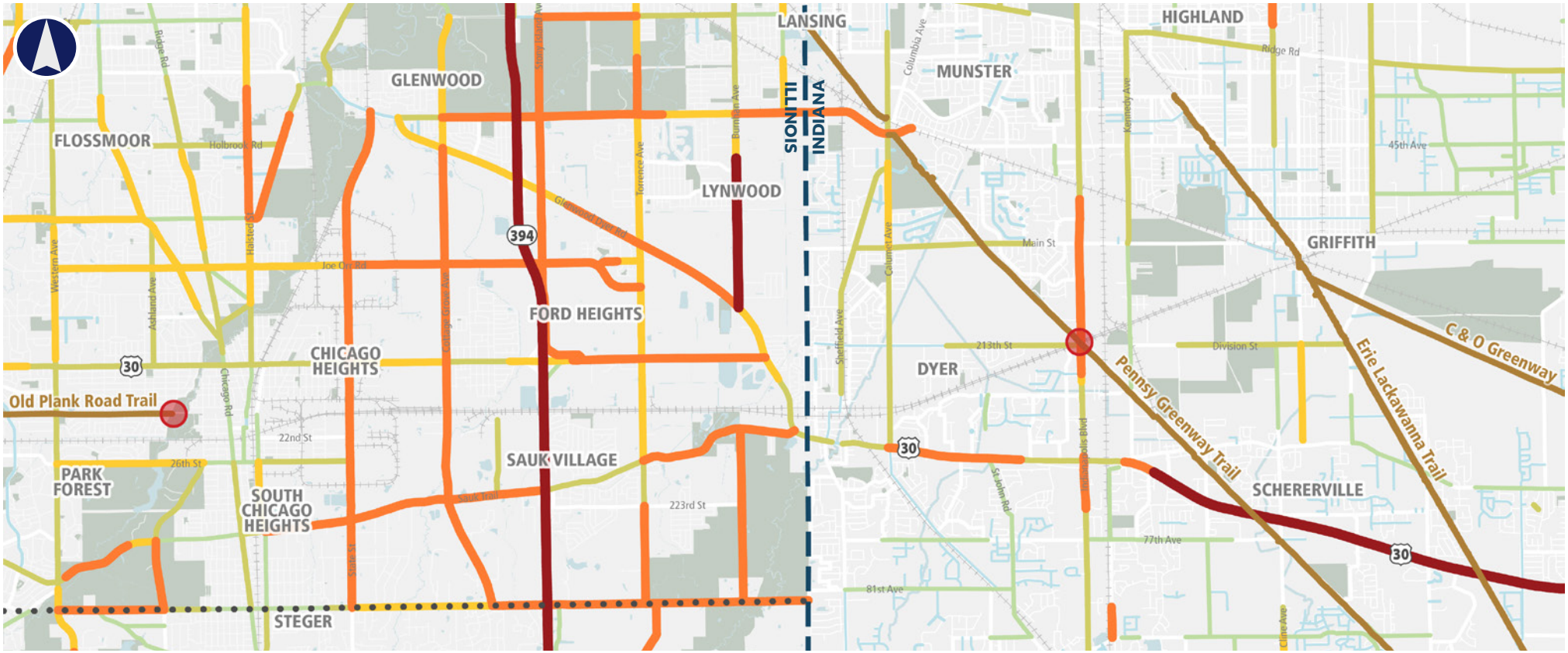
Number of Lanes and At-Grade Railroad Crossings

- 2 Lanes
- 3 Lanes
- 4 Lanes
- 6 Lanes
- At-Grade Railroad Crossing

The study area generally includes roadways with four or less travel lanes. As mentioned in the previous traffic volume exhibit, any alignment option that travels across the wider roadways with more travel lanes (e.g., Chicago Rd, State St, Cottage Grove Ave, and Calumet Ave) will need extra design considerations to ensure a safe and comfortable crossing experience for future trail users.

This area also has considerable freight-generating land uses, especially freight rail infrastructure. The major railroad track in the study area is an east-west corridor, however there are a few north-south tracks in Chicago Heights, IL and Dyer, IN. Railroad crossings are common and crossing these tracks will need to be factored into designing the different alignment options so trail users can safely traverse them.

Transportation Characteristics
Speed Limit



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

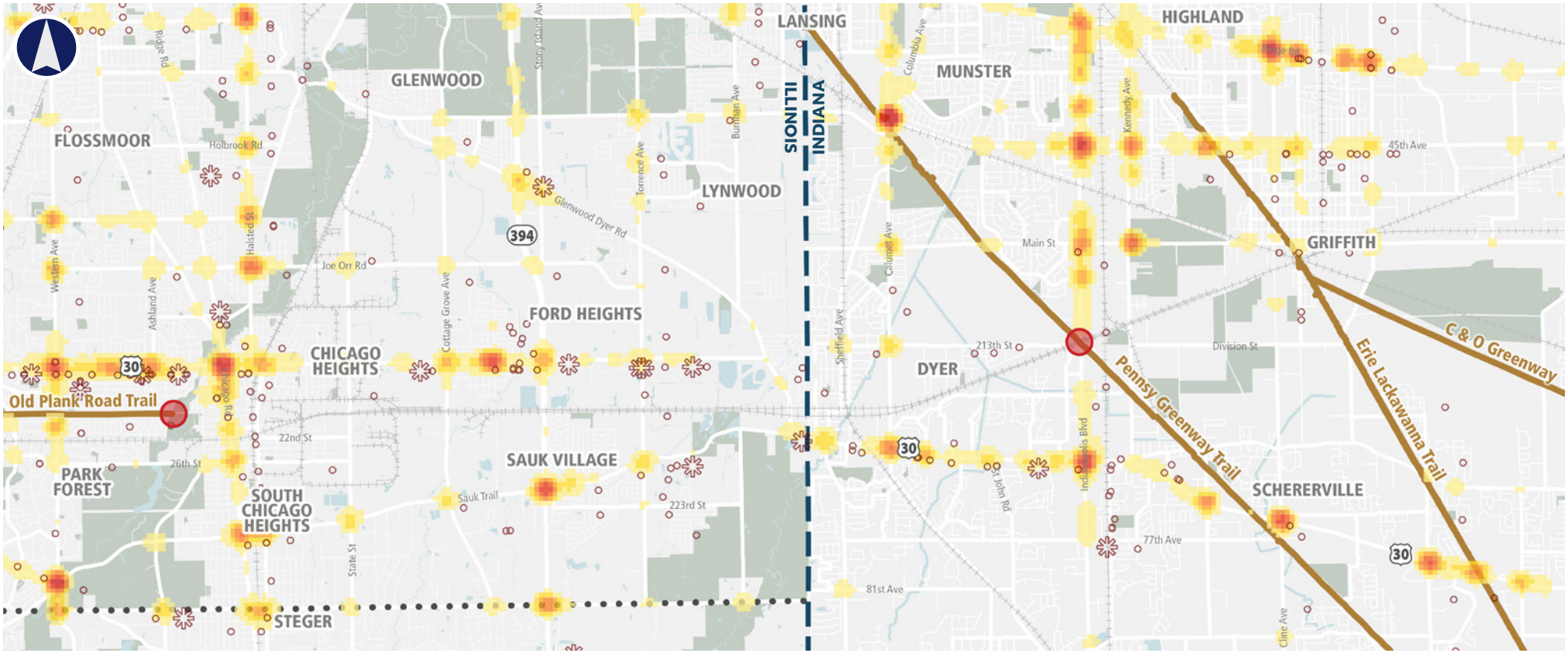
Speed Limit

- 25 mph or less
- 30 mph
- 35 mph
- 40 mph
- 45 mph
- 50 mph or more

Speed limits are typically 45 mph or less, except for IL 394 and a stretch along Burnham Ave which is 50 mph or more. Roadways with higher speeds and greater traffic volumes may provide challenges for future trail users trying to cross these streets.

Safety

Injury Crash Hot Spots & Severe Bicycle/Pedestrian Crashes (2017-2021)



Existing Major Regional Trails

Trail Connections for OPRT Extension

Freight Rail Lines

Park / Open Space

Density of Injury Crashes

Low Medium High

Severe Bike/Ped Crash

Fatal (K)

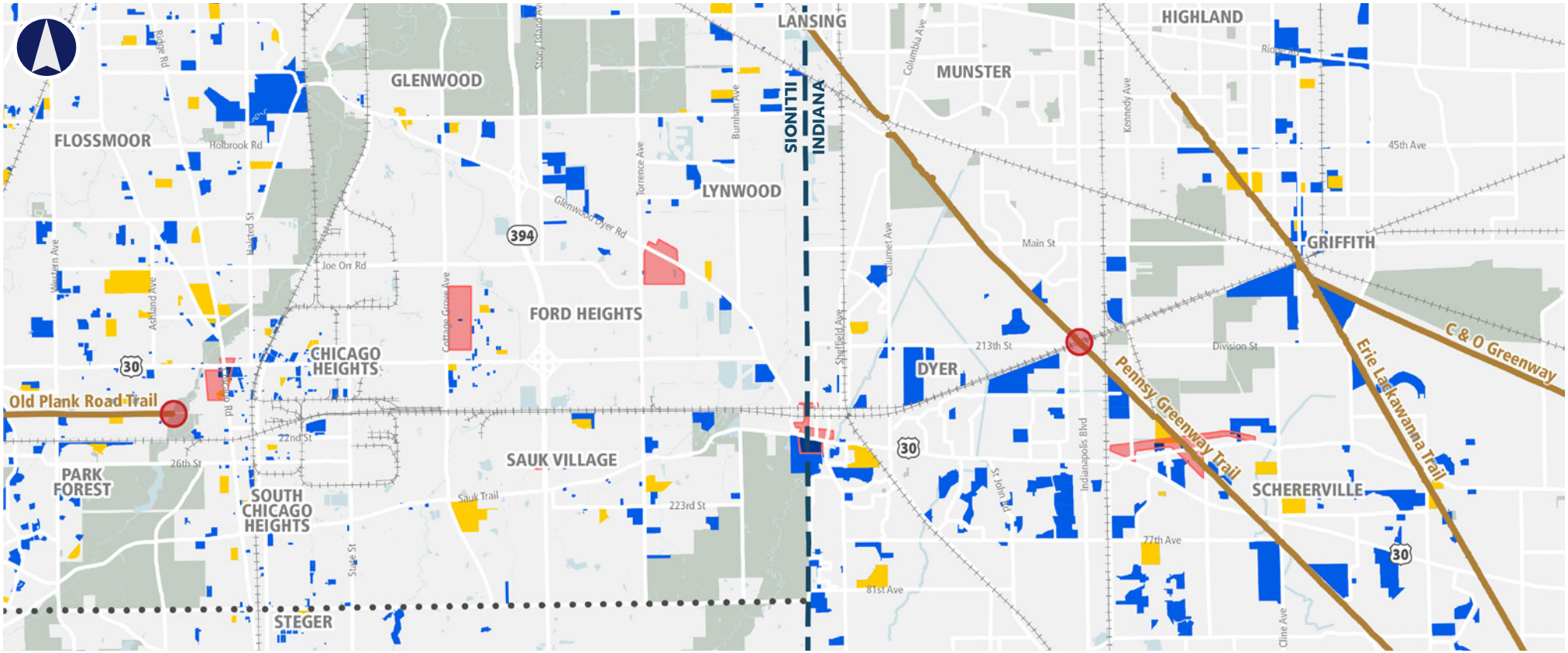
Severe / Serious Injury (A or B)

This map shows hot spots of all non-interstate crashes that involved an injury across all modes (vehicular, pedestrian, and bicycle). The results were based on a cluster analysis performed in GIS on the full set of 9,703 injury-involved crashes over a 5-year period from 2017-2021. The darker the color (red), the greater the concentration of injury crashes. The majority of crash hot spots occurred at major intersections or along roadways with higher speeds and greater traffic volumes. This map also displays all the fatal or serious injury bicycle or pedestrian crashes in the study area. Fatal crashes tended to occur along major roadways or at intersections of major roadways.

Note: Crash data for Illinois is from the IDOT annual crash file and for Indiana is from InDOT for the years 2017-2021. During this 5-year time period, 48,924 total non-highway crashes and 9,703 injury non-highway crashes were recorded in the study area (map extent).

Land Use and Environmental Resources

Land Use
Community-Oriented Uses



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

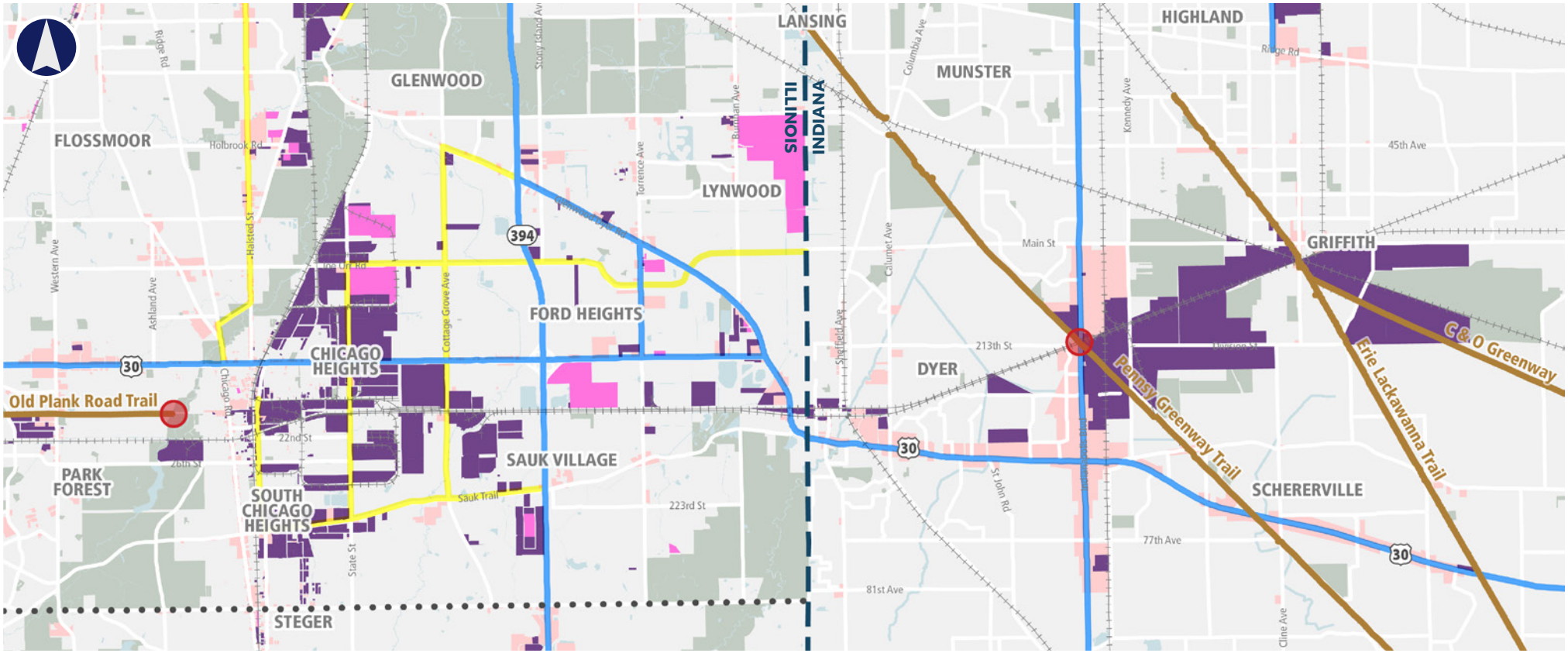
Community-Oriented Land Uses

- School
- Community-Oriented Use
- Future or Existing Downtown

This map highlights the locations in the study area that are community-oriented, meaning they are destinations for people locally and/or regionally or are student-focused. The land uses shown on this map center around destinations that cater to cultural/entertainment purposes, religious facilities, service organizations, or open/recreational spaces. The OPRT trail alignment has the opportunity to provide connections to these existing community-oriented places, or inspire development along the trail corridor that serves this purpose.

Note: In Indiana, NIRPC's land use data was only provided for Dyer, Schererville, and Griffith. The Indiana land use data is also categorized slightly different than CMAP's 2018 land use inventory dataset in Illinois.

Land Use
Freight-Generating Uses



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

Freight-Generating Land Uses

- Industrial Use
- Transportation Use
- Commercial Use *(secondary generator)*

Class I & II Truck Routes

- Existing
- Recommended*

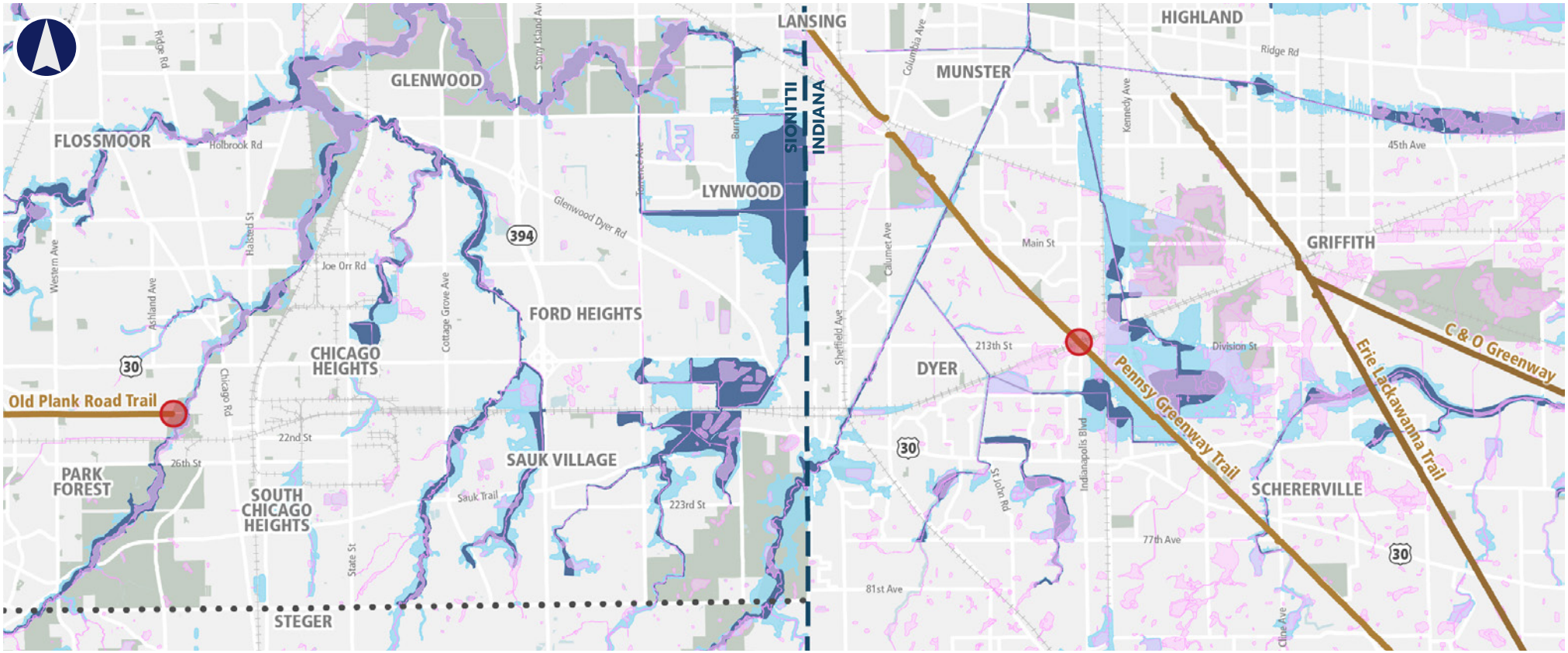
**Moving South Cook County: Truck Routing and Communities Study*

This map displays land uses that typically generate more significant truck traffic or rail activity, like industrial, transportation/utilities, and commercial spaces (e.g., for deliveries). Areas with higher truck traffic are worth noting since they may pose greater safety concerns for pedestrian and bicycle conflicts.

In the study area, the City of Chicago Heights has the bulk of this type of land use, as well as along the inactive rail line. A number of north-south roadways that span the study area are existing or potential future truck routes (e.g., State Street, Cottage Grove Avenue), so any trail crossings that interact with these roadways should consider designs that enable safe crossing for trail users.

Note: In Indiana, NIRPC's land use data was only provided for Dyer, Schererville, and Griffith. The Indiana land use data is also categorized slightly different than CMAP's 2018 land use inventory dataset in Illinois.

Sensitive Land Uses
Environmental



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

Environmental

- Floodway
- 100-Year Floodplain
- Wetland

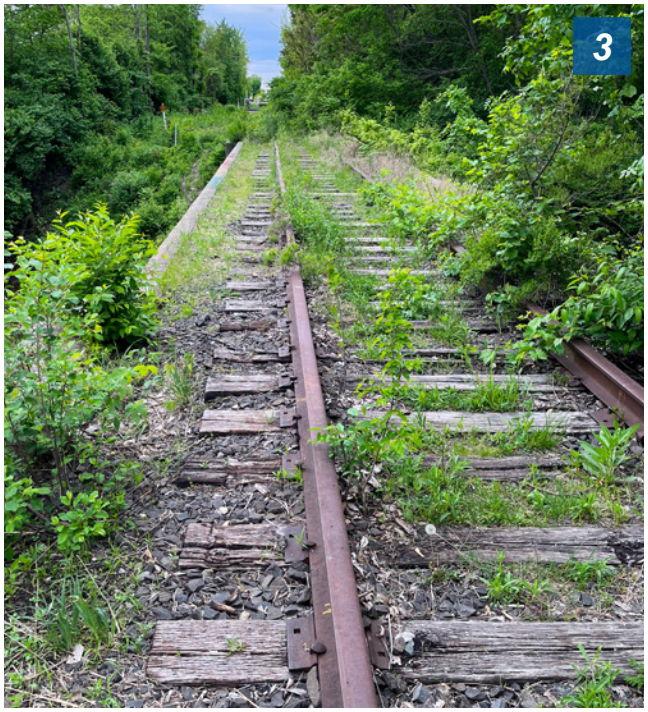
The study area has a number of natural resources that have the potential to impact how the alignment options are designed. A handful of creeks across the whole study area run north-south, which naturally creates floodways, floodplains, and numerous wetlands. Along the east-west freight corridor, several floodways and floodplains with larger footprints overlap across the tracks or abut the corridor. Several community parks, forest preserves, or nature preserves are also in the vicinity.

Challenges and Opportunities

Inactive Railroad

OPPORTUNITY

The east-west inactive rail line that runs through the study area is a prime alignment option due to its continuity between the existing Old Plank Road Trail and Pennsy Greenway. Several spots along this corridor already have the tracks removed. However, coordination with the owners of the inactive rail line will be necessary to move forward with a trail alignment along this corridor.



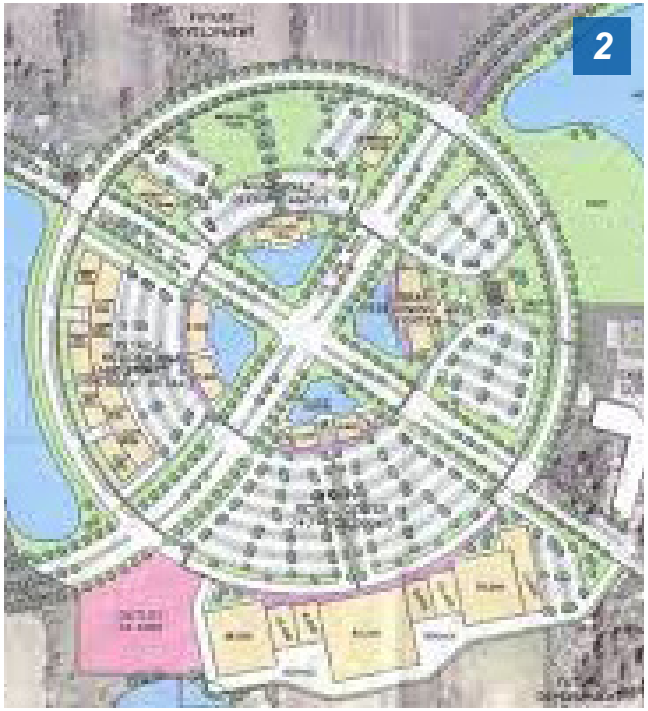
1. **Active and inactive railroad corridors near Cottage Grove Avenue** *(looking west)*
2. **Inactive railroad corridor near Central Park in Dyer, IN** *(looking east)*
3. **Inactive railroad corridor near Plum Creek** *(looking west)*

Connections to Downtowns and Key Destinations

OPPORTUNITY

The potential OPRT alignment has the potential to create connections to and from key assets of the surrounding communities (e.g., downtowns, parks). Several municipalities have plans to reimagine and redevelop their downtowns, making them prime destinations for future trail users to be linked to, but existing downtowns or commercial/recreational spaces would also benefit from this potential trail connection.

1. **Central Park Master Plan in Dyer, IN**
2. **Future Downtown Plan in Lynwood, IL**
3. **City Hall in Chicago Heights, IL**



Infrastructure in Place

OPPORTUNITY

Several structures are already constructed and have the potential to create a more seamless integration of the future OPRT extension. These include a roadway underpass and several waterway bridge crossings.

The Village of Lynwood had the foresight to construct an underpass beneath Lincoln Highway with the hope the future OPRT extension could utilize the inactive rail corridor. Additionally, several of the waterway crossings along the inactive rail line already have an existing bridge structure built, however the condition of each structure will need to be evaluated further.

1. **Lincoln Highway / US 30 underpass** *(looking east)*
2. **Schererville Ditch bridge crossing** *(looking southwest)*
3. **Plum Creek bridge crossing** *(looking northeast)*

Water Crossings

CHALLENGE

Several creek and ditch crossings will be required to make the OPRT extension possible. In most instances, existing bridge structures are in place, especially in the inactive rail corridor, however the condition of each structure will need to be evaluated further. Some locations have structures beyond repair and would need to be rebuilt if the trail alignment were to cross nearby.

1. **Thorn Creek crossing structure in disrepair** *(looking southwest)*
2. **14th Place and Thorn Creek bridge crossing in Chicago Heights, IL** *(looking east)*
3. **Lansing Ditch crossing** *(looking east)*

Arterial Roadway and At-Grade Railroad Crossings

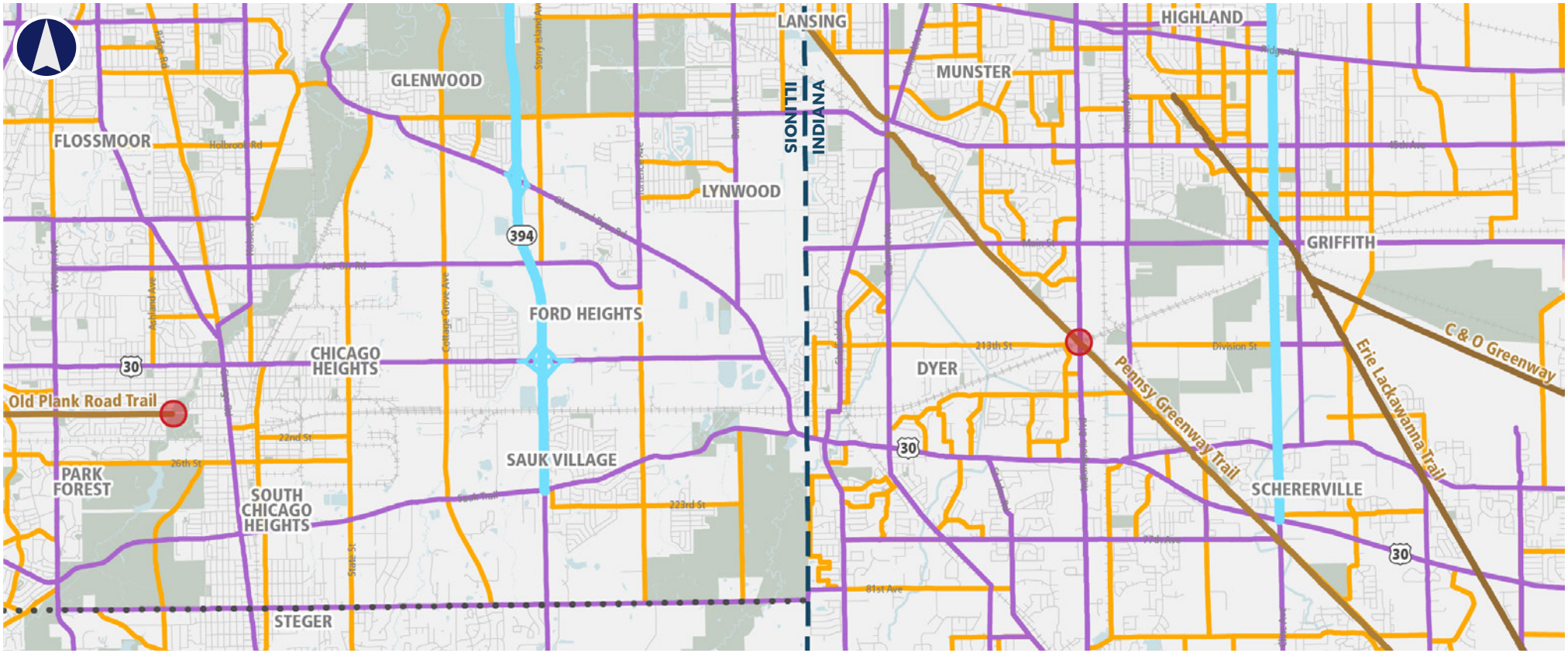
CHALLENGE

Across the entire study area, some major roadways and at-grade rail lines run north-south and pose a potential challenge for future trail users to safely cross. Some of these roadways have higher traffic volumes as well as truck traffic trying to access the various industrial or transportation-related uses. The north-south rail lines have the potential to cause trail users to wait longer times at these rail crossings for freight trains to pass through.

1. **State Street crossing**
   (looking west)
2. **Torrence Avenue crossing**
   (looking southeast)
3. **Union Pacific at-grade railroad crossing with 16th Street in Chicago Heights**
   (looking north)

Transportation Characteristics

Roadway Functional Class



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

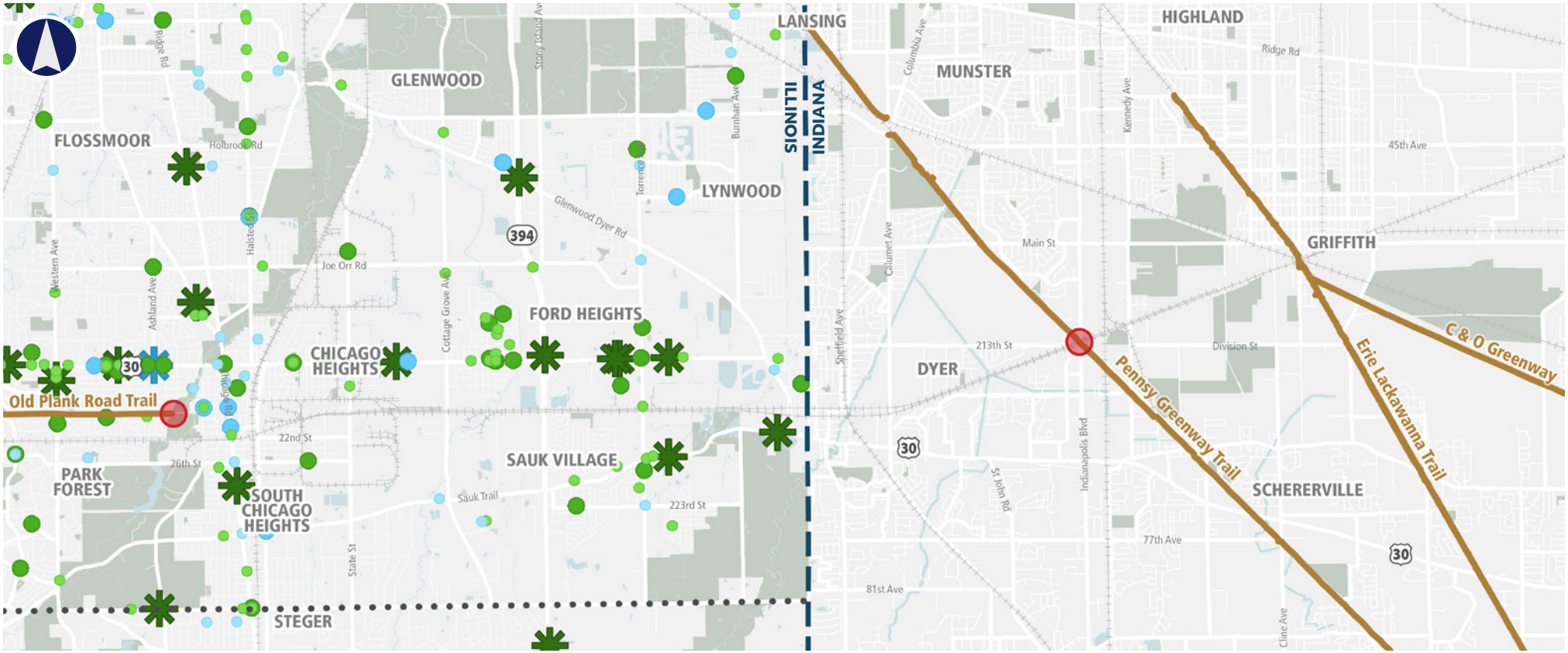
Functional Class

- Interstate / Expressway
- Arterial
- Collector
- Local Road or Street

XXX

Safety

Bike and Pedestrian Crashes (2017-2021)



- Existing Major Regional Trails
- Trail Connections for OPRT Extension
- Freight Rail Lines
- Park / Open Space

Severe Pedestrian Crashes

- Fatal (K)
- Severe / Serious Injury (A)
- Moderate Injury (B)

Severe Bike Crashes

- Fatal (K)
- Severe / Serious Injury (A)
- Moderate Injury (B)