Improved bike routes coming to Chicago suburbs

By Angie Leventis Lourgos, Tribune reporter

May 25, 2014

Transportation experts say northeastern Illinois is on the cusp of completing a system of bicycle routes that could soon allow safe and nearly continuous biking across the region — from Indiana north to Wisconsin and west past the corn fields.

"We're close to that being complete," said Tom Murtha, senior planner with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. "There are still gaps, but the gaps are very small compared to what's been completed. We're very close to being able to go, mostly by trail, across the region."

Local governments have spent the past 20 years or so building their own networks of trails and bike routes, but the more recent push is to connect those individual pathways into a larger, more regional system for bike travel across cities and counties, Murtha said. The planning agency envisions a system of nearly 2,700 miles of regional trails that will snake across northeastern Illinois by about 2040, compared to the 1,100 miles available today.

Gov. Pat Quinn last month announced more than $52 million in federal funds for new or improved bike paths and walking trails across the state. A little over $2 million will close one of the last few gaps in the West Branch Regional Trail in DuPage County, part of a larger network of trails that begins near Hanover Park and stretches south into Will County, eventually connecting to the I&M Canal State Trail. Another $2 million or so will finish the last segment of a 26-mile bike path along the Calumet-Sag Greenway Trail, which begins close to Lemont and heads east to the Burnham Greenway Trail near the Indiana state line. And more suburbs are considering neighboring communities when crafting or improving their individual bike plans, said Ed Barsotti, executive director of the League of Illinois Bicyclists.

For example, Barsotti said he recently helped officials in Buffalo Grove draft a grid of bicycle routes, which they linked to paths in adjacent Wheeling.

"We're seeing millennials and young entrepreneurs that want a town where you can bike," Barsotti said. "It's getting to the point where towns that are car-centric might be losing business."

Here are some other bicycle path projects across the suburbs:

**ORLAND PARK**
Orland Park has been gradually building up its bike path network over the past 11 years, said Mayor Dan McLaughlin, spending more than $1.3 million on paths in the village that connect to a larger network of forest preserve bike paths.
In the past two years, the village has added a path of a little less than a mile along Wolf Road and 153rd Street to its more than 45-mile network of street, off-street and sidewalk paths, and has also added another small section along 156th Street, village officials said.

In 2013, the village opened a 200-foot pedestrian bridge over La Grange Road just north of 143rd Street, which, while not long, has made it easier and safer for cyclists to connect bike paths on both sides of busy La Grange Road, McLaughlin said.
The Cook County Forest Preserve District hopes to begin work on a 5-mile asphalt bike path around the Orland Grassland nature preserve in the next few weeks. Village officials said Orland Park is working on plans for additions to the bike path network, including a path around Stellwagen Farm and paths along La Grange Road.

— Lauren Zumbach

**ROMEOVILLE**
Romeoville plans to add a bit of 21st century flair to its network of bike trails later this year.
The village will be the first in Illinois to install signs along a bike trail route that will allow users to scan a code and download different exercises to their device, according to Parks and Recreation Director Kelly Rajzer. Six signs will be placed along the ComEd trail starting this fall.

Users can scan one of four codes on the signs and download different exercise routines that will complement their bike ride, she said. Exercises will change on a monthly basis, she said.

— Geoff Ziezulewicz

**LAKE FOREST AND LAKE BLUFF**
Lake Forest and Lake Bluff are using grants to improve the Robert McClory Bike Path, an approximately 25-mile trail that runs through a handful of North Shore communities.

CMAP is giving Lake Forest $764,000 to build a half-mile mixed-use path that will connect two ends of the existing trail. The $87,600 that Lake Bluff received will widen a narrow bridge along the McClory path that runs over Route 176. Bob Ells, Lake Forest's superintendent of engineering, said the 10-foot-wide trail will fill a gap that forces riders to traverse a series of train station parking lots.
"A lot of it is a safety concern," Ells said.

Last year, Lake Forest also received a $47,000 grant to build a covered-shelter bike pavilion for Metra riders. For both projects, Lake Forest will contribute $206,000. The work is expected to wrap up by the end of the year.

In Lake Bluff, the village and the Lake County Division of Transportation will each provide $76,000, officials said.
— Dan Waters

**GLENVIEW AND NORTHBROOK**
Glenview and nearby Northbrook were awarded $1.07 million from the state last month to create a 2-mile, off-road bike path by 2016. Glenview officials, who will be heading the project, are now working on designs for the path, which will run along Shermer Road between West Lake Avenue and Willow Road, connecting the two villages.
Glenview's master plan, passed in 2007, proposes to install about 50 miles of bike paths and about 15 miles of sidewalk paths by 2030, according to village documents. So far, the village built about 3.8 miles of new bike lanes or trails and about 0.7 miles of new public sidewalks, according to Joe Kenney, Glenview's director of community development.

— Alexandra Chachkevitch

KANE COUNTY
Officials in the Tri-Cities say that instead of adding paths, their focus has been on increasing access to existing trails by connecting them.

In Kane County, the Fox River Trail spans more than 30 miles along the riverfront, connecting the northern part of the county to the southern part.

Jim Eby, Batavia Park District's capital projects manager, said that while there would not be a way to connect the roughly 20 miles of biking trails in the city, the district strives to make all trails as accessible as possible. Last summer, for example, the district moved a trail connection in the downtown area where runners and bikers previously had to go through a parking lot to get to the riverfront path, Eby said. "They can now get down to the trail a little safer," he said.

John Wessel, an assistant superintendent for the St. Charles Park District, said the district has been working to connect major trails to those in community parks, including Pottawatomie Park, East Side Sports Complex and Primrose Farm Park.

"Much as cities always have sidewalk connections and links that they're continually trying to improve upon, the bike trails are much the same," Wessel said.

— Stephanie K. Baer

NEAR WEST SUBURBS
In the western suburbs, planners are looking for ways to tie towns together and provide better ways to get to Chicago, said Lenny Cannata, a planning coordinator for the West Central Municipal Conference. A Regional Bike Plan the conference created in 2012 calls for increasing connections among towns, often using federal funding, he said. Cannata also points to Cook County's Complete Streets policy, passed in 2011, which calls for street improvement projects such as resurfacings to include bicycle and pedestrian elements.

A $1.8 million federally funded project added a bike and pedestrian lane along North Avenue from approximately First Avenue to Mannheim Road. Cannata is working on an improvement to Butterfield Road from Mannheim to Wolf Road that will include an approximately $1.6 million bicycle and pedestrian lane.

Oak Park added its first bike lanes, about 3 miles worth, to streets in 2011. The village also built two covered bike shelters near its CTA Green Line stop and plans to add five more near a CTA Blue Line stop. "The goal, obviously, is to encourage bike riding versus automobiles for the health and well-being of our village and for the reduction in greenhouse gases and emissions associated with cars," said Bill McKenna, Oak Park's assistant village engineer.
The village hopes to add bike lanes and shared-use lanes to Jackson Boulevard from Harlem Avenue to Ridgeland Avenue this summer, he said.

Another project, headed by the Illinois Department of Transportation, will add shared-use lanes to Ridgeland Avenue from Roosevelt Road to South Boulevard this summer and from South Boulevard to North Avenue next year, McKenna said.

La Grange is adding bike and moped parking at Stone Avenue Station and looking at ways to tie in with regional bike routes, Assistant Village Manager Andrianna Peterson said.

— Wes Venteicher

**WHEATON AND GLEN ELLYN**

Wheaton recently added new bike racks and replaced old ones throughout the city. Officials also approved a $180,000 project to design a bike route and put up signs guiding cyclists through town. A federal grant through the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program covered the majority of the cost.

The Glen Ellyn Park District is building a limestone trail extension to connect Ackerman Park to the Great Western Trail, making it easier for pedestrians and cyclists. This spring, the district also paid about $60,000 to build a three-quarter-mile walking and bike trail at Maryknoll Park.

— Quan Truong

**DOWNERS GROVE**

DuPage County officials are completing the engineering designs for the 31st Street Trail, a mile-long path just north of the Lyman Woods Forest Preserve and Midwestern University in Downers Grove. Downers Grove Park District officials approved the proposal last year, and construction is scheduled to start in 2015.

The 8-foot-wide path is part of the Interstate 88 Central DuPage Bikeway that links Downers Grove, Oak Brook, Oakbrook Terrace and Lombard, officials said. Cyclists would be able to more easily access the existing Salt Creek Greenway Trail to the east and eventually local paths that Downers Grove has slated for the west.

— Dawn Rhodes

**GLENCOE**

The Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe is partnering with the Cook County Forest Preserve to build a 0.8-mile extension of the North Branch Trail that will connect to the Green Bay Trail in Highland Park. The new 10-foot-wide asphalt path is being built on the south side of Lake Cook Road, said Harriet Resnick, vice president of visitor experience and business development for the Botanic Garden. By connecting the two popular trails, Resnick said, the garden hopes to attract more visitors on bike or foot.

"We wanted to increase our usage of the garden — and our free usage," Resnick said. The two entities will together pay about $350,000 of the $2 million project cost, with the majority of the rest coming from federal grants, Resnick said. Construction began last month, Resnick said, and is expected to be complete by mid-August.
All told this summer, the Cook County Forest Preserve will be building about 20 miles of bike paths, said Don Parker, spokesman for the district.

— Gregory Trotter