

Plans in the works to expand the Southland cycling scene

By Vickie Jurkowski | April 29, 2015

Biking can be a solo path to serenity or a means to a social circle.

You can pace yourself alongside pedestrians, Rollerbladers, equestrians and birdwatchers on trails paved with asphalt or limestone or crush it by mountain bike on steep rocky climbs and tight corners and then, when the forest preserves close at dusk, gather for an organized cookout with like-minded adventurers.

In the Southland, there's no shortage of cycling clubs, events and trails. Yet wheels are spinning to make our bicycling scene even bigger and better.

Push the pedals at upcoming events such as the Forest Preserve District of Will County's Ride the Rock, the Major Taylor Cycling Club of Chicago's South Suburban Long Haul or the Chicago Area Mountain Bikers' monthly Ride & Grill.

When it comes to everyday locales, we have the goods and are getting more.

The Southland already boasts the gem of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County's trail system with the Palos and Sag Valley, a hilly and scenic area with 78 miles of trails, 14 of them paved, and a single-track trail attracting mountain bikers from far beyond our region.

Boosting our trail system is construction underway at Thorn Creek Bicycle Trail, Orland Grassland and Oak Forest Heritage Preserve, and, most notably, the highly anticipated Cal-Sag Trail nearing fruition.

The western portion of the Cal-Sag Trail, a 13-mile route connecting the I&M Canal and Centennial trails on Route 83 in Lemont to Cicero Avenue in Alsip, will open with a ribbon-cutting party and bike ride June 6 at Lake Katherine in Palos Heights, where 2.5 miles of the trail traverses past water, prairie and forest.

"We welcome any incentive to help get people outside, connecting with nature and improving their health and well-being. Having greater connectivity along the Cal Sag between different communities is great for the (entire) southwest region," Lake Katherine operations manager Gareth Blakesley said. "The opening of the trail will bring a whole different group of people to Lake Katherine and make the park a lot more accessible."

By 2018, another 13-mile segment of the Cal-Sag Trail will link the Burnham Greenway Trail, which now ends in Hegewisch, to Chicago's Lakefront Trail, creating a 100-mile-plus loop through the south suburbs dubbed the Southland Century Trail, said Steve Buchtel, executive director of Homewood-based Trails for Illinois and Friends of the Cal-Sag Trail.

"The suburban ring around Chicago has something Chicago is not ever going to replicate – those massive forest preserve district open spaces," Buchtel said. "In the Southland we have some very cool trails. And the Southland Century Trail, the biggest trail story in the region, is not a dream anymore. Every segment is either under construction or scheduled to go to bid."

The federally funded Cal-Sag project includes efforts by various entities.

This summer, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and village of Burnham will start construction on closing a 3-mile gap in the Burnham Greenway to connect the Cal-Sag Trail to the Chicago Lakefront Trail, which ends near the South Shore Cultural Center.

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County (FPDCC), starting in spring 2016, will construct a bridge over the Little Calumet River from Blue Island to its Joe Louis Golf Course in Riverdale plus a connection to the Major Taylor Trail and Whistler Woods. The FPDCC also will create a connection to the Dolton Avenue Prairie in Calumet City and provide a parking lot there by 2018.

The Cal-Sag Trail "is a huge regional connection, something the south suburbs does not have," said Pamela Sielski, an FPDCC landscape architect who serves as project manager for several trail projects including the Cal-Sag. "The length of trail, 26 miles, is significant."

Elsewhere, the FPDCC is wrapping up construction this spring and summer to link 11 miles of linear trails at Thorn Creek and to create loop trails at Orland Grassland and, by fall, the Oak Forest Heritage Preserve.

An FPDCC project in the proposal stage would link the two existing sections of the popular Tinley Creek Trail, which includes a 3.17 mile loop around the George W. Dunne National Golf Course and is accessible by Yankee Woods and Midlothian Reservoir on the north end and by Vollmer and Flossmoor roads on the south.

"We are at about 140 miles of paved trails overall and there's over 20 miles under construction now," FPDCC chief landscape architect Dave Kircher said. "It's the most active we've ever been in our history in terms of paved bicycle trails."

While trails offer a free route to family time and physical fitness, they also can be a means to making friends.

"I like traveling under my own power, in the fresh air, with friends," said Al Sturges, a Park Forest resident who serves as president of Folks on Spokes Bicycle Club and chair of its 34th annual Easter Ride held April 26.

During good weather, the club draws some 20 bicyclists for its Saturday morning rides.

"The social aspect of biking is important because it builds a sense of community," said Jerry Stoeckigt, executive director of the Chicago Area Mountain Bikers Association (CAMBr), whose members number more than 200 in its Palos chapter and maintain the single-track trails at the Palos preserve area known as the "Triangle."

"Mountain biking gets you out in the woods and it's safer because you control the environment" as opposed to trails requiring crossing streets heavy with car traffic, Stoeckigt said. "A lot of people

who ride in Palos are not adrenaline junkies. But if you want to ride faster and more aggressive, the opportunities are there."

CAMBr expects 650 to 1,000 participants for the area's premier mountain bike race, the Palos Meltdown, in August. Early-bird tickets are on sale through Friday.

The organization also hosts a variety of events for people interested in mountain biking or meeting other bikers, including free mountain bike riding classes led by instructors who attended Mountain Bike Coaching Schools in North Carolina and three trips a year, with Brown County, Ind., up next.

"We also have rides for women to introduce them to mountain biking without feeling intimidated to keep up with the crowd," he said.

A monthly Ride & Grill takes place at 2 Bici Bicycle Shop in Willow Springs, located steps away from the Palos and I&M Canal trails.

Bike Trails

In addition to the aforementioned trails in the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Southland trails include Arie Crown near Hodgkins and Salt Creek near Brookfield Zoo. For maps or more information, call 800-870-3666 or go to fpdcc.org.

The Will County Forest Preserve District includes:

Centennial Trail/I&M Canal Trail – Crushed limestone trail with four segments, access points including the Joliet Iron Works Historic Site or Isle a la Cache Museum in Romeoville; connects to Old Plank Road Trail, I&M Canal State Trail and more.

Hickory Creek Bikeway – Hilly, paved linear trails through woodlands, accessible from Schoolhouse Road in New Lenox or Route 30 in Mokena.

Joliet Junction Trail – A 4-mile paved linear trail accessible at Theodore Marsh in Crest Hill and Joyce Road in Joliet; connects to Rock Run.

Old Plank Road Trail – A 21-mile paved linear trail from Joliet east through New Lenox, Frankfort, Matteson and Park Forest that is part of the Grand Illinois and American Discovery trails; connects to Thorn Creek, Hickory Creek and Centennial/I&M.

Plum Creek Greenway Trail – A 3.15-mile hilly linear and loop trek of crushed limestone in Goodenow Grove Nature Preserve in Crete.

Rock Run Greenway Trail – Nearly 10 miles from Crest Hill to Joliet through woodland and wetland.

Spring Creek Greenway Trail – More than eight miles of hilly crushed limestone in two segments in Messenger Marsh in Homer Glen and Hadley Valley in Joliet.

For maps or more information, call 815-727-8700 or go to reconnectwithnature.org.

Elsewhere:

Izaak Walton Preserve in Homewood - A 193-acre, self-supporting area with five miles of trails, woodlands, sand dunes, prairie and wetlands; 708-798-1850; homewoodizaakwalton.com.

Lakefront Trail – The 18-mile bicycling and walking path along Lake Michigan from 7100 South near the South Shore Cultural Center, pass 63rd and 57th street beaches and north to Montrose Harbor, Foster Beach and Hollywood Avenue; chicagobikes.org; chicagoparkdistrict.com.

A sampling of bicycle clubs and events:

Cal-Sag Trail West Segment Grand Opening/Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony – June 6 at Lake Katherine in Palos Heights, featuring Ride the Cal-Sag, a family bike ride hosted by the Palos Kiwanis Club, and a VIP Tent with refreshments, music and a beer garden sponsored by Hailstorm (VIP tickets are \$10 before May 17 or \$15 day of); Friends of the Cal-Sag Trail at 708-365-9365 or calsastrail.org.

Chicago Area Mountain Bikers Association – Numerous events including the Palos Meltdown, Chicago's premier mountain bike race, Aug. 9 in the Palos forest preserves (early-bird registration of \$30, \$25 for members, until May 1); Ride & Grill May 20 at 2 Bici Bicycle Shop in Willow Springs; Palos Triangle work days May 9, 20 and 30; plus Palos work days, women's rides and more; cambr.org.

Folks on Spokes Bicycle Club – Weekly rides of 15-100 miles for bicyclists of all abilities, including May 2 in Frankfort; folksonspokes.com.

Major Taylor Cycling Club of Chicago – Regular rides and special events, including the South Suburban Long Haul Ride May 9 from Homewood to Joliet and back; 708-212-6529; majortaylorchicago.com.

Oak Lawn Bike Psychos Club – Rides for all levels of ability; Meetings the first Monday of the month; bikepsychos.org.

Ride the Rock – Free 16-mile family bike ride through Joliet with rest stops, food, entertainment and activities hosted by the Forest Preserve District of Will County, May 16, Lower Rock Run Preserve, I&M Canal Access, 1966 Empress Road, Joliet; 815-727-8700; heritagecorridorcvb.com.