

DNAinfo: Bike Path Will Link Edgewater to Joliet, and Nearly All of It Is Off-Road

By Justin Breen | April 15, 2015

CHICAGO — By next year, you'll be able to bike from Edgewater to Joliet — and nearly all of it off-road.

The Lakefront Trail now stretches about 18 miles from Hollywood Avenue and Lake Shore Drive on the north lakefront through Downtown and down to the South Shore Cultural Center. An approximately 6-mile trail of on-street bike lanes along U.S. 41 ends at the Burnham Greenway Trail at Wolf Lake in Hegewisch on the Southeast Side.

But plans next year call for the Burnham Greenway Trail to be extended into south suburban Burnham. There, the paved, off-road trail will link into a 74-mile path through the south and southwest suburbs that now runs approximately from Calumet City to the Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve in Darien.

"Pretty darn exciting," said Steve Buchtel, executive director of Trails for Illinois, a nonprofit with a mission to build a statewide trails community. "A big draw for city residents is the [suburban] forest preserves and regional trails that are a relatively short — but still annoying — drive away."

In addition to suburbs like Chicago Heights, Frankfort and Joliet, the trail would lead city cyclists to what some say are the best mountain bike trails in the area: the 15,000-acre Palos Preserves in the Cook County Forest Preserves near Willow Springs.

"These trail connections give people in the south suburbs a bicycle expressway to many destinations," said Leslie Phemister, suburban outreach manager for Active Transportation Alliance. "It's very exciting to hop on our bikes and get downtown, to Joliet, or forest preserves throughout the region. Providing these bikeways gets people — and families in particular — out of their cars and enjoying a safe ride."

Buchtel said connecting the Burnham Greenway to the south suburban trails will cost about \$6 million, which includes a \$4 million bridge over five rail lines. He said the project is federally funded.

A segment that runs from Wolf Lake to the Hegewisch South Shore train line is in the early stages and will be built this year, Buchtel said. The rest will be built in 2016.

What's more, the 74-mile path will eventually become a 100-mile loop called the Southland Century Trail when a 26-mile east-west paved path is completed in 2017. Called the Cal-Sag Trail, it's being finalized at a cost of \$21 million, 80 percent of which is funded with federal grants and 20 percent with private, local and state funds.

The western half of the Cal-Sag Trail is under construction now from Lemont to Alsip. Its grand opening will be June 6 — National Trails Day — according to Buchtel. The Chicago Cycling Club and Major Taylor Chicago Cycling Club are planning rides to the grand opening in suburban Palos Heights, Buchtel said.

By 2017, cyclists also will be able to access the Southland Century Trail through Beverly, Roseland and other South and Southwest Side city neighborhoods through the Major Taylor Trail, which currently ends in Whistler Woods in south suburban Riverdale. Those trails are being completed in 2017, Buchtel said.

When everything is complete, all but 3.5 miles of the 100-mile loop will be off-road, Buchtel said. Buchtel called the new trails a "tremendous value" because they connect "hundred of miles of trails to one another, and all of it to Chicago."

"For many Chicago Lakefront Trail users, exploring the metro region's trails has meant a drive or train ride out across daunting gaps," Buchtel said.

"The Cal-Sag Trail and Burnham Greenway means that if you already ride to the Lakefront Trail or Major Taylor Trail, those great trail excursions start at your front door."