

## Introduction

People are increasingly relating open spaces and recreational trails to an enhanced quality of life. They know that having a safe place for children to play in their neighborhood is a positive amenity for their community. They have heard about how walking and biking trails can help increase property values and decrease fuel consumption. They are perhaps seeing more people getting out of their cars and onto a bicycle to go to work or recreate. They sense the calming effect that being out in the open air with plenty of grass and natural vegetation has on hectic lifestyles. They appreciate having public swimming pools, nature centers, and a means to a destination other than the street.

Here in Champaign County, we have seemingly endless agricultural landscapes, acres of wooded areas and prairie, historical and natural places of interest, and urban activity centers, all waiting to be visited and appreciated. Local agencies and residents are actively seeking ways to unite the community with its surroundings. The Greenways and Trails Plan is an important step toward completing a countywide Greenways and Trails system that can be used and enjoyed by residents and visitors alike.

*Local agencies and residents are actively seeking ways to unite the community with its surroundings.*



*Children from a local elementary school examine wildlife during a field trip to Busey Woods, Urbana.*

## The Vision

Imagine it is the year 2033, the bicentennial of Champaign County. Two hundred years earlier, the County had built its foundation on the railroad. Once oriented towards trains, and later the automobile, Champaign County has evolved its transportation system into a network of rails, streets, greenways, and trails that support all modes of transportation. More specifically, coordinated efforts between municipalities and governmental units have resulted in a system of greenways and trails on a local and regional level that accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists. The system accommodates users for both leisure and commuting.

The overall network is one that is safe and accessible for all users. Routes and trails are accessible for those with disabilities by providing paved trails, special markings, and other specific design elements. Also, safety features such as landscaping, design, and lighting provide for the security of all users. Continued maintenance and high quality design of the trails keep the infrastructure in useable condition as well as create a pleasing environment for its users.



Meadowbrook Park, Urbana

*Continued maintenance and high quality design of the trails keep the infrastructure in useable condition as well as create a pleasing environment for its users.*

The County's trail network provides a variety of recreational opportunities. Connecting trails link urban areas to state and county forest preserves, parks, and various activity centers in other counties. The trail and bike path network also provides linkages to park district and other recreational facilities including parks, gyms, water parks, and other indoor and outdoor facilities. The greenways and trails themselves also provide different recreational uses including running, walking, and bicycling.

Besides recreation, the greenways and trails within the County create opportunities for people to use other modes of transportation to reach shopping destinations, places of employment, residential neighborhoods, schools and other destinations. Various paths provide direct and indirect links from residential areas to destinations throughout urban and rural areas that do not conflict with motorized vehicles or face barriers such as dangerous intersections and interstates. These routes also provide for bike storage at public and private destinations.

While 2033 is several decades away, this future ideal scenario is the ultimate vision of the *Champaign County Greenways and Trails Plan*.

### Purpose of the Plan

The purpose of the Champaign County Greenways and Trails Plan is to foster interagency cooperation in order to implement the best greenways and trails system possible for our area. By identifying the needs, issues, and opportunities of each member agency, we can determine what projects need to be done, how they should be prioritized, what funding is available, and the logical order in which projects should be implemented. Further, we can ensure that no duplication of effort or illogical spending will occur. By coordinating with all our stakeholders in this way, we are able to look at the system as a whole concept rather than as many individual pieces scattered throughout the county.

### What are greenways and trails?

A **greenway** is a corridor of open land that is managed for conservation and/or recreation. Greenways may follow natural land or water features such as rivers, shorelines or ridges, or human landscape features such as abandoned railroad corridors, trails or canals. Greenways may form connections between communities, parks, historic and cultural sites, and nature preserves. Greenways differ in their location and function, but overall, a greenway will provide recreational benefits, protect natural areas, enhance natural beauty and quality of life in neighborhoods and communities, or stimulate economic development opportunities.

A **trail** or path is a type of greenway that is separated from vehicular traffic and is dedicated to the use of pedestrians, bicyclists, roller skaters, wheelchair users, etc. Trails can be used for recreational purposes as well as to connect different land uses and facilities.



First Street Trail north of Windsor Road, Champaign.

## Why Greenways and Trails are Important

According to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources *Greenways and Trails Planning Assistance Program* brochure, “greenways and trails positively impact individuals and improve communities by providing not only recreation and transportation opportunities, but also by influencing economic and community development. Some of the many trails and greenways benefits include:

- Making communities better places to live by preserving and creating open spaces;
- Encouraging physical fitness and healthy lifestyles;
- Creating new opportunities for outdoor recreation and non-motorized transportation;
- Strengthening local economies;
- Protecting the environment; and
- Preserving culturally and historically valuable areas.”



*A greenway in the Homer Lake Forest Preserve.*

*Greenways and Trails make communities better places to live by preserving and creating open spaces.*

## Scope of the Plan

Currently, available resources preclude the inclusion of some recreational uses found in some greenways and trails plans in other parts of the country. The scope of this document, and planning that takes place on the basis of this document, will thus exclude horseback riding, waterway travel and recreation, and off-road motorized vehicle use.

The Champaign County Greenways and Trails Plan will guide the development of pedestrian paths, bikeways, public open spaces, and other greenways over the next 20 years.

## The Roots of Greenways and Trails in Champaign County

Over the past few decades, there has been increasing awareness and interest in improving recreational facilities and preserving open spaces. The following glimpse of national and state programs provides a context for our efforts here in Champaign County.

### National Level: Rails to Trails

In the 1960s, largely in the Midwest, abandoned and unused rail lines began to be used as public trails:

“Once the tracks came out, people just naturally started walking along the old grades, socializing, exploring, discovering old railroad relics, marveling at old industrial facilities such as bridges, tunnels, abandoned mills, sidings, switches and whatever else they could find. In the snows of winter the unconventional outdoors enthusiast skied or snow shod on the corridor, but these were days before even running and all-terrain bicycles were common, so the predominant activity was walking. Of course, none of the corridors were paved or even graded - they were simply abandoned stretches of land.

Today, more than 35 years later, rail-trails have begun to make a significant mark, with 11,892 miles of rail-trails and around 100 million users per year” (*Rails to Trails Conservancy, [www.railtrails.org/about/history.asp](http://www.railtrails.org/about/history.asp)*).

### State Level: Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

Every five years, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources publishes the *Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan*. This document details existing facilities, user statistics, future projects and actions, and a five-year implementation schedule citing agency responsibility for projects. The plan identifies prevalent issues such as accessibility for disabled persons, linking transportation modes with recreation areas, and interagency coordination.

#### IDNR

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) began a program in 1995 to support greenways and trails in downstate Illinois. The Greenways Program provided financial and technical assistance for regional greenway and trail plans, including Champaign County’s 1999 *Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails Plan (NBT)*.

### Champaign County: Greenways and Trails Efforts

Recreation and open space planning is not new to Champaign County; indeed, first efforts for our area date back as far as the 1930s. The Champaign County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) published *A Regional Planning Program for Champaign County, Illinois* in 1937. This document provided a framework for comprehensive planning at the County level, and included a “Recreational, Scenic, Wildlife and Historical Resources” section. The educational opportunities afforded by nature areas, and recommendations regarding possible parks and trails are among the ideas discussed in the plan.

In 1972, the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission published the

*Areawide Open Space-Recreation Plan and Program* as the open space element of the county comprehensive plan. This report inventoried existing available open spaces, appropriate possible uses for these areas, and recommendations for development. The authors of the document integrated data from a leisure opinion survey with the existing conditions data to interpret how the open spaces should be used. This methodology is similar to the survey and existing conditions integration that were performed during the planning process for this current plan.

The *Champaign County Land Use Goals and Policies* was adopted in 1977. This booklet had several goals and policies related to natural resources conservation, provision of recreational facilities, and greenways development. This is the most recent document regarding land use policies for the whole of Champaign County.

Champaign County inclusion in the Illinois Department of Natural Resources greenways program began with a few agencies from Champaign County attending the IDNR Governor's Workshop on Greenways and Trails in May 1995. Through that effort, several agencies came together to form the Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails Task Force. The initial agencies to form this group were the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, Champaign County Forest Preserve District, the Urbana Park District, the Champaign Park District, and the Rantoul Park District.

In July 1995 the task force held its first informational meeting to seek feedback on whether there was continuing interest and support from people in Champaign County to develop a regional Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails plan. At this meeting, the Greenways program was presented, a mission statement for the task force was reviewed and revised, and a consensus was reached that the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission would be the lead agency in this effort. The mission statement formed by the task force was to develop a plan for Champaign County that would identify linkages to other such systems on local, regional, state, and national levels.

A second meeting was held in April 1996 for the purpose of seeking further interest and responses to this planning effort. Two subcommittees were formed to begin preparing this proposal: the Grant Review and Funding Subcommittees. These subcommittees commissioned the creation of a grant application that would be submitted to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) in early 1997. In collaboration with IDNR, the member agencies in the NBT Taskforce worked over the next two years to complete the *Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails Plan*, which was completed in August 1999.

In 2001, local agencies once again came together to discuss updating the 1999 NBT Plan; a more comprehensive approach was recommended that would widen the scope of the NBT Plan to include 20 years of planning and implementation, guidelines for trail development, an expanded existing conditions inventory, and a more user-friendly map. The NBT Steering Committee approved the plan's proposal in February of 2002, initiating the 18-month process in April 2002.

*The first Champaign County Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails Steering Committee included the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, Champaign County Forest Preserve District, the Urbana Park District, the Champaign Park District, and the Rantoul Park District.*

Later in 2002, the NBT Steering Committee decided that the term Natureways should be replaced by the more definable and widely accepted Greenways. The *Champaign County Greenways & Trails Plan* joins dozens of other plans in a nationwide effort to improve quality of life through the provision of recreational and alternative transportation opportunities.

### Related and Current Planning Documents

Several agencies that participate in the Champaign County Greenways and Trails Plan have their own plans for how facilities and infrastructure will be built in both the short and long term. Park Districts, Cities, Villages, and other agencies in Champaign County have projects and timelines that could easily mesh with other geographically similar projects to produce a better system that considers each agency's vision and knowledge base.

- The Champaign County Forest Preserve District created its *Master Plan* in 1994 to detail policies concerning land acquisition, capital improvements, resource management, and land stewardship for its properties. Inventories were updated and long-range plans and priorities were developed for the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve, Salt Fork River Forest Preserve, and Lake of the Woods.
- Champaign Park District published its *Long-Range Plan for Parks, Recreation Areas, and Facilities* in November 1993. They created a *Long-Range Plan Supplement* to the original plan in January 2001. The documents detail community needs, analyses, and recommendations for the District's lands and facilities for a long-term planning horizon.
- Urbana Park District published its *Parks and Recreation for the Years 2000-2003* in April 2001. This document outlines goals, objectives, and trends for a short-term planning horizon. The District's inventory and budget, as well as a section on planning and capital development, illustrate where and how their properties and facilities will evolve for local residents.
- The City of Champaign updated its *Comprehensive Plan* in 2002; the update includes a section on Parks and Open Space that outlines issues and opportunities for the city in terms of parks, open spaces, and recreational corridors. It also emphasizes coordination with other agencies in planning for such areas in and around the city.
- The City of Urbana is in the process of updating its *Comprehensive Plan*; the Existing Conditions Report (2002) provides information about collaborative efforts with agencies such as the Urbana Park District in planning for parks and other recreational district within and beyond the borders of the city.
- In 2002, the Village of Savoy published a *Comprehensive Plan Update* that outlines goals and objectives the Village has created for open spaces and recreational facilities. The Village is in the process of creating a comprehensive parks and open space plan.
- The *Comprehensive Development Plan* for the Village of Rantoul, adopted in 1993, updates its Comprehensive Plan. The document outlines implementation measures that include developing and preserving greenways and open space as growth occurs.
- In 1997, the Village of Tolono published its *Official Plan and Maps*. The plan calls for additional park facilities and expansion of current facilities in

its section on Park and Public Lands.

- In its 1992 *Comprehensive Plan*, the Village of Mahomet outlines goals and objectives for expanding its current inventory of parks, greenways, and other open spaces.
- Currently, the Champaign Urbana Urbanized Area Transportation Study (CUUATS), the transportation entity of the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission, is in the process of updating its Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), which details how the urbanized area transportation system will be planned for and constructed over the next 20 years. The information found in this *Greenways and Trails Plan* will be integrated into the LRTP in its Pedestrian and Bicycle section.

### Plan Process

The *Champaign County Greenways and Trails Plan* was completed during an 18-month process extending from April 2002 to September 2003. During this time, CCRPC staff and member agencies held monthly Steering Committee meetings; updated and expanded the greenways and facilities inventories; created and processed a Greenways and Trails survey; renewed implementation goals, objectives, and activities; created new maps; held several public involvement meetings; and identified and prioritized greenways and trails projects for the 20-year planning horizon. The full schedule of activities that was created for the Plan Proposal can be found in Appendix 1.

### Public involvement

Without the involvement of the community, a plan will often not realize its full implementation potential. When residents have a vested interest in a project or idea, realization of goals can come more quickly and with more benefits to the residents than if they had not been involved. Likewise, the exchange of knowledge and ideas between residents and local government agencies can greatly enhance the outcome of a plan and its products. For these reasons, the Greenways and Trails Steering Committee sought the early and active participation of residents during the planning process. CCRPC staff used the following methods to involve the public in its planning efforts: resident survey, comment cards, information sharing, and public workshops.

#### *Resident Survey*

CCRPC staff created a 29-question survey that was distributed to a random sample of 3000 Champaign County residents in January 2003. The survey asked questions relating to walking and biking habits, trail usage, transit service, and funding greenways and trails projects. There was an overall response rate of 25%. Survey respondents were provided with an open-ended comment opportunity at the end of the survey; these comments were given to the Greenways and Trails member agencies for consideration, and integrated as appropriate into implementation measures and Appendix 4: Public Comment. The survey and its findings can be found in Appendix 3.

During survey distribution, an issue arose concerning how the surveys were distributed to University of Illinois students; this will be remedied during the implementation phase with a new round of surveys for the students.

*When residents have a vested interest in a project or idea, realization of goals can come more quickly and with more benefits to the residents than if they had not been involved.*



*Comment cards*

Comment cards were available at all public meetings for residents to hand in during the meeting or mail in at their convenience. The comments received in this format were given to the Greenways and Trails member agencies for consideration, and were integrated where appropriate into implementation measures and Appendix 4: Public Comment.

*Information sharing*

CCRPC staff and Greenways and Trails member agencies make every effort to provide information to the public upon request. All final Greenways and Trails related documents are available for review at CCRPC offices, including previous versions of the Plan and maps. In addition, staff and member agencies staff welcome comments and information from residents; such information sharing can play a significant role in planning and implementing greenways and trails.

*Public Workshops*

The Greenways and Trails Steering Committee held two public meetings during the planning process. Advertisements were placed in the daily *News Gazette*, fliers were distributed via the member agencies, and invitations were sent out to local government representatives and all Greenways and Trails taskforce members.

The first meeting, held on September 26, 2002, asked participants to separate into six groups: Environment, Transportation, Parks and Recreation, Intergovernmental and Regional Cooperation, Public Facilities, and Development Impacts. Participants were invited to identify and discuss issues related to each theme, and then develop policies to guide planning for greenways and trails based on those issues. Approximately 45 residents attended the workshop.

*The public workshop format allows residents, planners and engineers to share ideas about the future of the Greenways system in Champaign County.*



*Members of the Public Facilities Group present their ideas at the September 2002 workshop.*

The second meeting, held on January 28, 2003, asked participants to identify their ideal greenways and trails system. Residents outlined general goals and implementation activities, as well as specific regional, local, and neighborhood level greenways and trails projects they would like to see created over the next 20 years. Approximately 45 residents also attended this event.

### Project Prioritization

The Greenways and Trails Steering Committee created a project prioritization checklist that helps determine how well proposed projects comply with the goals and objectives of this plan. Goals and objectives, and thus the project prioritization factors, were developed based on input from the public and best planning practices. More information on project prioritization can be found on page 35. The list of prioritized projects can be found beginning on page 36.

## Existing Conditions

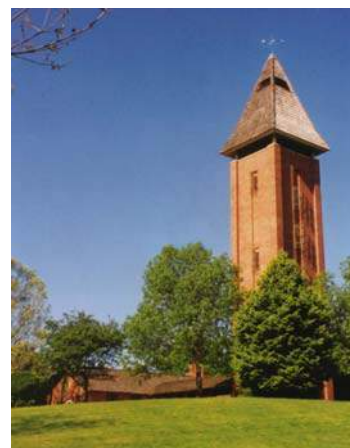
### Champaign County

Champaign County is located in the heart of east-central Illinois (see Maps 1 and 2). Champaign and Urbana, the primary cities of Champaign County, are approximately 136 miles south of Chicago, 120 miles west of Indianapolis, Indiana and 165 miles north-northeast of St. Louis, Missouri. The county is the fifth largest in the State of Illinois, with 638,528 acres. Of these acres, approximately 5,085, or .7%, are designated as parks. Of the non-agricultural area in the county, approximately 4.7% are park acres.

The total population of Champaign County for the 2000 Census was 179,669. The largest urban areas in Champaign County are Champaign (Census 2000 population 67,518), Urbana (36,395), and Rantoul (12,857). Eighty-four percent of the county's population lives in urban areas, including the cities and incorporated villages.

Champaign County, under the auspices of the Champaign County Forest Preserve District, has four forest preserves: Lake of the Woods, Homer Lake, Middle Fork River, and its latest acquisition, River Bend.

- *Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve*, shown in Map 3, covers approximately 900 acres. Paved roads within the park connect historical landmarks, the lake, the Early American Museum, Mabery Gelvin Botanical Gardens, and the Hartwell C. Howard Golf Course. A 3.3 mile bike trail runs through Lake of the Woods from Prairieview Road on the east to Crowley Road on the west side of the park.
- *Middle Fork River Forest Preserve*, shown in Map 4, covers approximately 1,608 acres in the northeastern corner of the county. The preserve contains two restored wetlands habitats and several ponds as well as part of the Middle Fork River. Highlights of the preserve include the Harry L. Swartz Campground with adjacent shower house, the Activity Center, an Amphitheater and 6.5 miles of hiking trails.



Hi Tower, Lake of the Woods.