

7 THE ROOTS OF CHAMPAIGN COUNTY'S GREENWAYS AND TRAILS

There has been increasing awareness and interest in improving recreational facilities and preserving open spaces at the national, state, and local levels to improve peoples' quality of life. The following sample of national and state plans and programs provides a context for greenways and trails efforts in Champaign County, Illinois.

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-shoed 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, some 50 years later, rail-trails have begun to make a significant mark, with over 20,000 miles of rail-trails and over 100 million users annually (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy 2011).

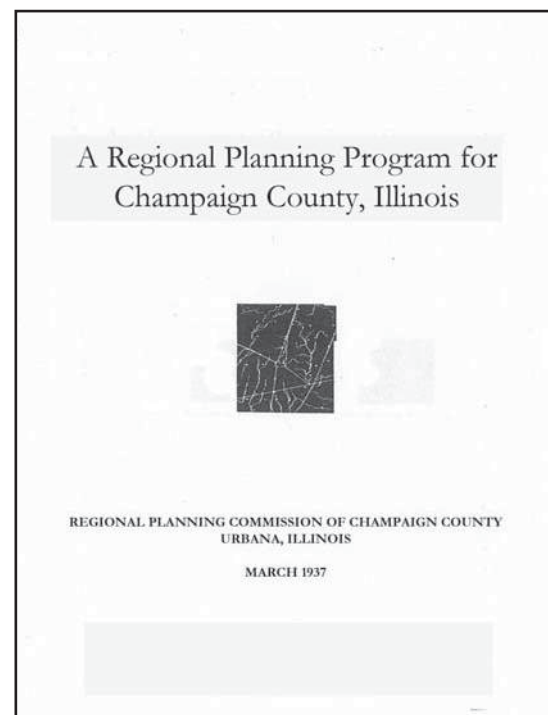
State Level: Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Every five years, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) 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 outdoor recreational projects. The plan identifies significant

issues such as accessibility for people with disabilities, linking transportation modes with recreation areas, and interagency coordination. The IDNR also began the Greenways & Trails Program in 1995 to contribute to the *Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan*. This Program provided financial and technical assistance for regional greenway and trail plans in downstate Illinois, including Champaign County's 1999 *Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails Plan* and the 2004 *Champaign County Greenways & Trails Plan*.

Champaign County: A Local History of Greenways and Trails

The planning of recreation and open space in Champaign County traces back to the publishing of *A Regional Planning Program for Champaign County, Illinois* by the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) in 1937. This document provided a framework for outdoor recreation planning at the County level, including a "Recreational, Scenic, Wildlife and Historical Resources" section and discussing the importance of developing parks and trails for educational opportunities.



In 1972, the CCRPC published the *Areawide Open Space-Recreation Plan and Program* as the open space element of a draft County comprehensive plan. This plan inventoried existing available open spaces, appropriate uses for these areas, and recommendations for development. The document's authors integrated data from a leisure opinion survey with existing conditions data to interpret how to use the open spaces. This methodology is similar to the planning process for the *2004 Champaign County Greenways and Trails Plan*, which synthesizes survey information and existing conditions in the County. In 1977, the first Champaign County Land Use Goals and Policies were adopted with several goals and policies intended to guide decisions related to natural resources conservation, provision of recreational facilities, and greenways development.

The inclusion of Champaign County in the IDNR Greenways & Trails 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 Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails Task Force held its first informational meeting to seek feedback on whether there was continuing interest and support from people in the County to develop a regional Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails plan. During this meeting, the Greenways and Trails Program was presented, a mission statement for the NBT Task Force was reviewed and revised, and a consensus was reached that the CCRPC would lead the planning 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 to seek further input for 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 IDNR in early 1997. In collaboration with IDNR, the member agencies in the NBT Task Force worked diligently over the course of two years to complete the *Natureways, Bikeways, and Trails Plan* (NBT Plan) in August 1999.

Two years later, local agencies reconvened to discuss updating the 1999 NBT Plan, and decided on a more comprehensive approach that included 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, initiated the 18-month planning process in April 2002, and decided that the term "Natureways" should be replaced by the more definable and widely accepted "Greenways." In 2004, the *Champaign County Greenways & Trails Plan* joined dozens of other plans in a nationwide effort to improve quality of life through the provision of recreational and alternative transportation opportunities.

Since 2004, most of the local agencies involved in the planning process created the Champaign County Greenways & Trails Technical & Policy Committees to oversee the plan's implementation. The committees contracted with CCRPC to staff the implementation process. CCRPC created three editions of the folding map and distributed them to Champaign County residents and visitors; a funding sources list was created to help member agencies implement projects; and design guidelines, new logos, and signage designs and specifications were developed and approved by each member agency to create a recognizable identity for Champaign County Greenways & Trails. The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) contracted with CCRPC in 2011 to initiate a 24-month planning process to update the *2004 Champaign County Greenways & Trails Plan*.