

Bike paths to nowhere

To cyclists' frustration, interruptions and dead ends mark many trails in the Chicago area

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Unwinding for mile after scenic mile, the Chicago area's nationally recognized web of bike trails carries riders to realms far from city streets, to sun-splashed lakefront, industrial vistas and forests that seem light-years from civilization.

But gaps in those same trails can jolt cyclists back to reality. Some paths dead-end. Others dump riders into parking lots or side roads. Often, there is another bike path nearby, but getting to it can mean braving a ride in a gutter alongside rushing cars and trucks.

"All of a sudden you're not in a forest preserve anymore, you're on a busy, busy street," said Bob Friend of Riverwoods, whose pet peeve is a dead end in the Des Plaines River Trail, near Lincolnshire, which requires a detour along Milwaukee Avenue. "The only word I can really think of is frustrating."

As public officials try to close these gaps in their dream of a regional network of bike paths, they are finding that the last mile is often the hardest. Small spans present big obstacles that may take decades to overcome: lack of money for bridges, tunnels and land; property owners who don't want to sell; towns that either don't want paths or have other priorities.

"Part of the reality is we've done the easy stuff, and now we have the hard stuff," said Nick Jackson, deputy director of the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation. "The gaps take a lot more work than the trails themselves."

Among dozens of missing connections, Chicago's Lakefront Path ends abruptly near multilane Hollywood Avenue to the north. The south end of the North Branch Trail leaves riders stranded at the busy intersection of Caldwell and Devon Avenues. The Illinois & Michigan State Canal Trail stops and starts at biker-unfriendly points such as Illinois Highway 83 near Lemont Road and 135th Street on the outskirts of Romeoville.

It's not simply about recreation. The area has added hundreds of miles of trails in the last 20 years, and it has become clear that tying those trails together has the potential to create a new transportation network, planners say, largely separate from road, rail and waterway.

"We want to provide community connectivity, so people can make short trips easily," said Tom Murtha of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. "It's important that people have a lot of [transportation] options."

Benefits, he said, include cutting car and truck traffic, reducing emissions, saving gasoline and providing exercise for bike commuters.

Funding key to linked system

A growing awareness of the benefits of alternative transportation helped open the federal spigot in the early 1990s, Murtha said. That funding has been critical to the creation of the trail system, he said, but there still is not always enough to build that last bridge or buy that last piece of property.

Also, there are owners who either don't wish to sell or are holding out for more money, including the owner of the last half-mile of property along the Des Plaines River Trail in Lake County, a 33-mile path that continues in Cook County. Lake County has been reluctant to use eminent domain to acquire the land, a decision with which some residents disagree.

"Eminent domain is not a policy that should be undertaken lightly," said Friend, an attorney. "But in rare exceptions, like when you have one parcel holding up 50 miles of trail linkage, that's the time to do it."

The paths aren't for every rider -- many "roadies" prefer the direct routes and fast pavement of the streets, but there are legions of recreational riders and commuters who aren't comfortable riding at the mercy of cars and trucks.

"There are a lot of people who have licenses but can't drive," said Barron Hooper Sr. of Chicago's Beverly neighborhood. "It's just too dangerous."

Hooper, 44, had to turn his bike around at the end of the South Side's new Major Taylor Trail as it dead-ended at a parking lot in the Whistler Woods Forest Preserve near Riverdale. "It's crazy. It'd be nice if they went all the way downtown. It would save on gas," he said.

That dream is a tall order.

"Our overall goal is to create as many continuous connections as possible," said Brian Steele, spokesman for the Chicago Department of Transportation. "[But] you're dealing with a 150-year-old city, a tightly congested urban area, so in a lot of places [there is] a lack of land."

Lack of land an obstacle

The city plans to unveil a master plan for bike trails this year and has tried hard in recent years to link trails with bike lanes and better signs, he said. Abandoned rail beds have been converted into paths, including the soon-to-be-constructed Valley Line Trail along Kostner Avenue from Devon to Bryn Mawr Avenue, Steele said.

In other places, though, the land problems could be intractable, such as at the north end of the Lakefront Path, which ends at a rocky shoreline. There, cyclists can either turn around or brave the narrow, crowded streets around Loyola University -- a situation not likely to change any time soon because all the lakefront property is privately owned, Steele said.

Things are more promising to the south, where officials hope eventually to link the Lakefront Path with the Burnham Greenway, which could open up the entire south side of the metro area, including Indiana. There are also plans to link the Major Taylor with a planned trail along the Cal-Sag Channel from Torrence Avenue to the Centennial Trail near Lemont.

"In not so many years, people will be able to bike from Chicago to Joliet almost exclusively on off-road trails," Murtha said. "One piece after another, we're putting this network together."

In the suburbs, there is a different set of obstacles.

More land is available, but paths can upset some homeowners. It took 20 years to plan and build the Old Plank Road Trail, which runs from Joliet to southern Cook County, said Bruce Hodgdon, spokesman for the Will County Forest Preserve District.

"[People worried] that gangs from Joliet were going to get on their bikes, rape and pillage in New Lenox, then ride back to Joliet with a big-screen TV on the back of their bike," he said. Now, Hodgdon said, "There's been a 180-degree shift in sentiment. ... People are seeing this as a real asset to the community."

Other issues have priority

Funding is always an issue. Trails can cost \$1 million a mile to build -- and bridges millions more -- at a time when budgets are tight and education, health care and other forms of transportation compete for money.

Yet there has been progress.

After trying for years, Lake County has gotten a railroad's permission to tunnel under a set of tracks near Lake Bluff, allowing the Skokie Valley Trail to link to the North Shore Path, which runs along Illinois Highway 176.

Joliet, meanwhile, recently celebrated the opening of a short stretch of the Joliet Junction Trail that links it to the I&M Canal Trail, Hodgdon said.

Then there is the Centennial Trail, which has spent more than a decade on maps as a dotted-line "planned trail" from Lyons to Lemont. Construction bids are being solicited, Cook County officials said, and work could soon begin to link the southwest suburbs to the I&M Canal Trail, among others.

And cyclists, when given the chance, are making their voices heard. At a meeting in April, more than 100 people packed a room in Northbrook to hear more about a project to use an abandoned rail bed to extend the south end of the Skokie Valley Trail from Lake-Cook Road to Glenview Road, linking it with the North Branch Trail.

"People came out in droves because they are excited about this stuff," said the bicycle federation's Jackson. "I think there's a real demand for more transportation options [and] it can help knit communities back together. I heard that a lot."

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