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# Suburban Bikeways *for All*

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE OF BIKING IN CHICAGO'S SUBURBS

## About this report

The *Suburban Bikeways for All* report outlines the key ingredients for suburbs to create a low stress bike network that is accessible and comfortable for everyone, from children to senior citizens and everyone in between. The report also documents the state of cycling in Chicago's suburbs and provides examples of suburbs that have successfully implemented elements of a Bikeways for All strategy. The report is a resource for local advocates, planners, and decision makers as they seek to take their community's bike network to the next level.

Active Trans will use the priorities, case studies and key messages captured in *Suburban Bikeways for All* to guide our advocacy throughout the region. This platform will enable us to conduct outreach to new allies and champions, build support among elected officials and decision makers, and change the narrative around biking in Chicago's suburban communities.

## Our vision: Suburban Bikeways for All

Chicago's suburban communities consist of more than 6 million people spread across more than 280 villages, towns and cities. Signs of progress towards better biking conditions are everywhere, from the steady growth of our trail network to the arrival of protected bike lanes in suburban communities and a significant surge in the number of people biking.

But for many suburban residents, comfortable biking options remain very limited. Without greater investment in bicycle planning and infrastructure in Chicago's suburban communities, we risk missing out on the many different economic health, and environmental benefits biking can bring.



<sup>1</sup> Pocket Guide to Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Pedaling to Prosperity: Bicycling will save Americans \$4.6 billion in 2012, League of American Bicyclists, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Grabow, M., et al., 2010 - Valuing Bicycling's Economic and Health Impacts in Wisconsin, January 2010

## Benefits of biking



**Household costs:** The average annual cost of owning a car is more than \$8,000, while a bike costs only \$300 a year<sup>1</sup>. Across the country, Americans save an estimated \$4.6 billion each year by replacing costly car travel with trips by bike<sup>2</sup>.



**Local economy:** In Wisconsin, for example, bicycle recreation and tourism contributes almost \$1 billion annually to the state's economy<sup>3</sup>.



**Health:** People who commute by bike have a 41 percent lower risk of dying from cancer and a 52 percent lower risk of dying from heart disease<sup>4</sup>.



**Environment:** Transportation on our roads accounts for more than 25 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the Chicago region<sup>5</sup>. As an emissions-free transportation alternative, encouraging more trips by bike can help us tackle climate change.

The challenges suburban communities face in becoming more bike-friendly are different than those facing large cities like Chicago. Car-centric development and land use patterns have ruled the day in Chicago's suburbs for decades. Sprawl has moved destinations further apart and communities are isolated by major highways and supersized arterial streets. Residential development has occurred in clusters with streets designed to move cars into and out of neighborhoods while ignoring other modes. For many residents, driving is the only way to reach many destinations and even shorter trips to school, a transit station or a restaurant downtown are made by car.

Across the U.S. and around the world, we're seeing many suburbs start to reverse these trends and begin to build more livable, vibrant and healthy communities with a strong bike network at the center. These networks typically include many low-stress neighborhood greenways that take advantage of residential streets that already have low levels of vehicle

<sup>4</sup> Celis-Morales Carlos A, Lyall Donald M, Welsh Paul, Anderson Jana, Steell Lewis, Guo Yibing et al. Association between active commuting and incident cardiovascular disease, cancer, and mortality: prospective cohort study BMJ 2017; 357 :j1456

<sup>5</sup> Chicago 2010 Regional Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory, Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2012



traffic. These greenways connect to off-street trails that link destinations that are farther apart and are home to lots of recreational riding. When on-street connections on major thoroughfares are needed to reach downtown, transit stations and office parks, they are made with protected bike lanes that provide physical separation between people biking and motor vehicle traffic.

These burgeoning suburban networks share some critical characteristics: they're Close, Comfortable and Connected. Frequent destinations like schools, transit and retail districts should be within two miles (close) of each other, accessible by low-stress bike routes (comfortable) and connected to residential neighborhoods without interruption.

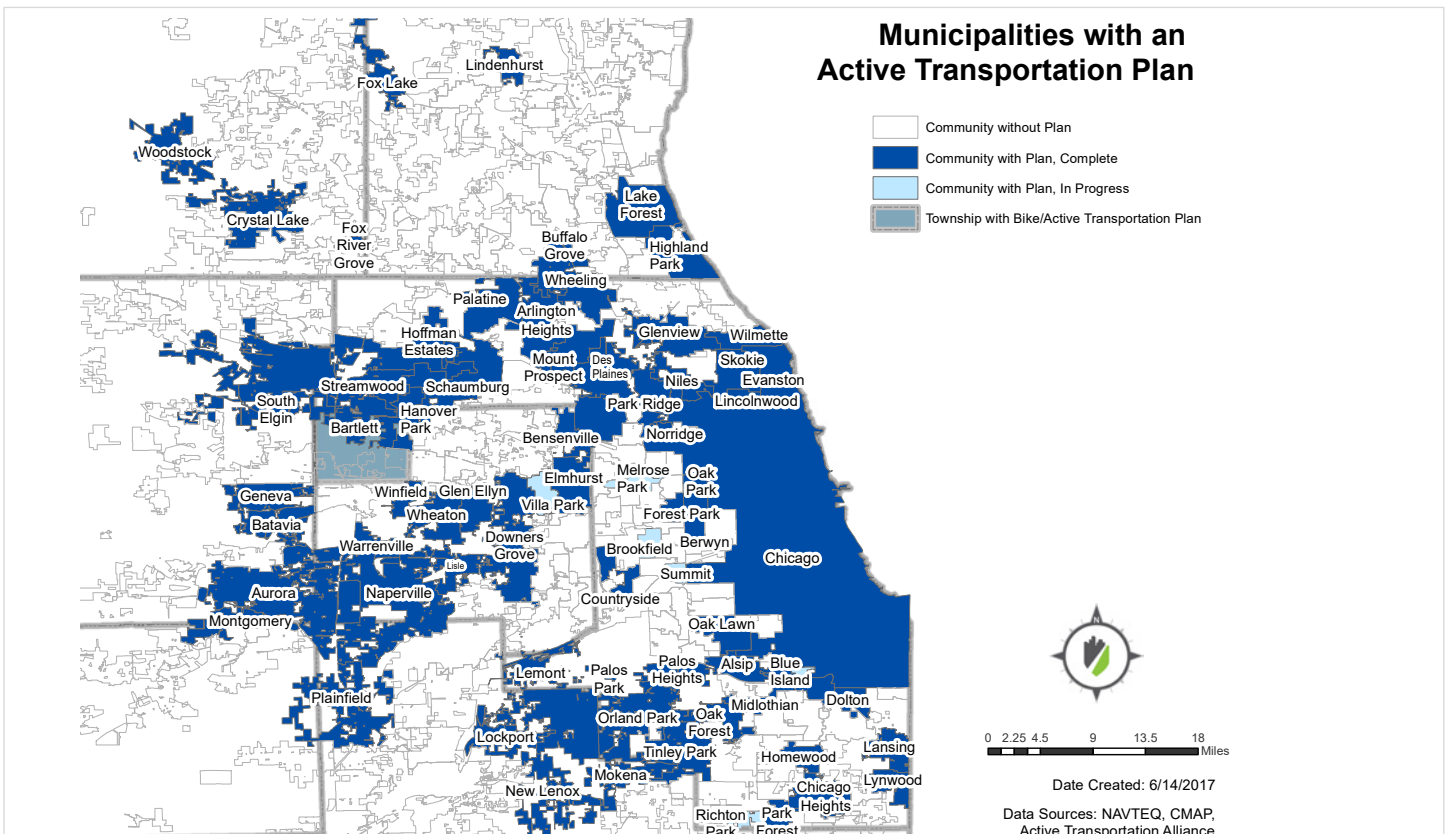
Networks that feature varying degrees of the "3 C's" have proven to attract new and more frequent riders, and we'll feature some of these success stories throughout this report. We'll also highlight the key planning and policy measures local communities need in place to lay the groundwork for close, comfortable, and connected bike networks.

## The problem: Chicago's suburbs struggling to make headway on better biking

To make *Suburban Bikeways for All* a reality, we need more than technical know-how. We also need political and community support for better biking in our communities. To help make the case, this section will provide an overview of the current state of biking in Chicago's suburbs and how we can do better.

We identify five specific trends:

- Most suburbs are not designed to be bike friendly
- Too few suburbs have the right policies and plans in place
- The number of people biking to work in the suburbs is falling
- Bike crashes remain stubbornly high
- Large gaps remain in the regional trail network



## Most suburbs are not designed to be bike friendly

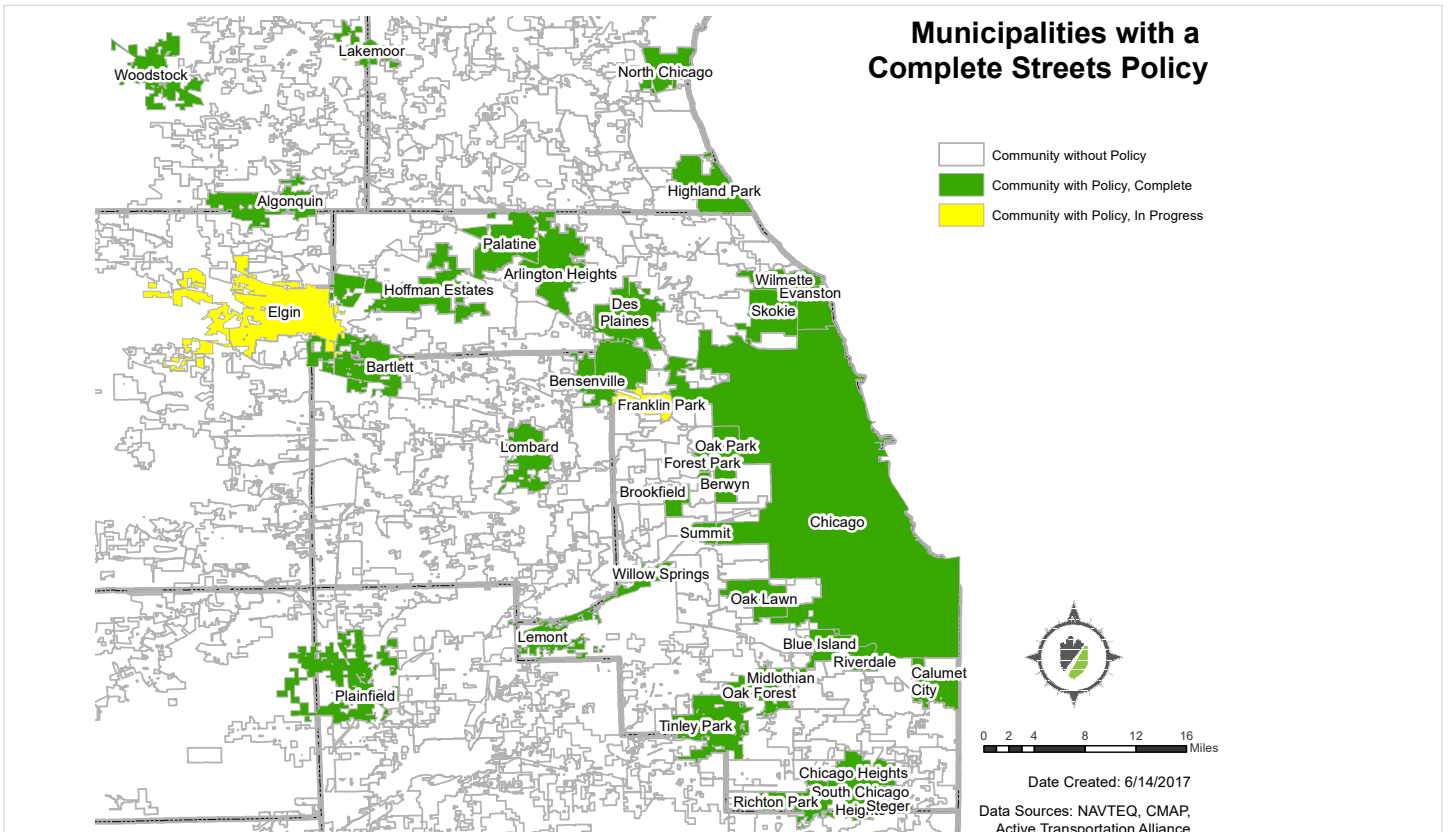
As mentioned above, car-centric development and land use patterns make biking in most suburbs difficult, and this contributes to relatively low rates of cycling and stubbornly high crash numbers. What's lacking are Close, Comfortable, and Connected bike networks that encourage more people to use bikes as everyday transportation.

- **Close:** Frequent destinations like schools, transit and retail districts should be within two miles of each other.
- **Comfortable:** Bike infrastructure should consist of low-stress bikeways, including multi-use trails, physically protected bike lanes, and neighborhood greenways (quiet residential streets optimized for biking with signs and markings).
- **Connected:** Suburban bike networks should be seamlessly connected to residential neighborhoods and other destinations without interruption.



## Too few communities have the right policies and plans in place

- Metropolitan Chicago is home to more than 280 municipalities, but only a few dozen have the key policies and plans in place necessary to support better biking.
- While some communities may lack the leadership or will, many communities also lack the resources necessary to support these important activities – a critical barrier to equitable progress. We feature local, regional, and state policy options later in the report that can help communities overcome these and other barriers.







## The number of people biking to work in the suburbs is falling

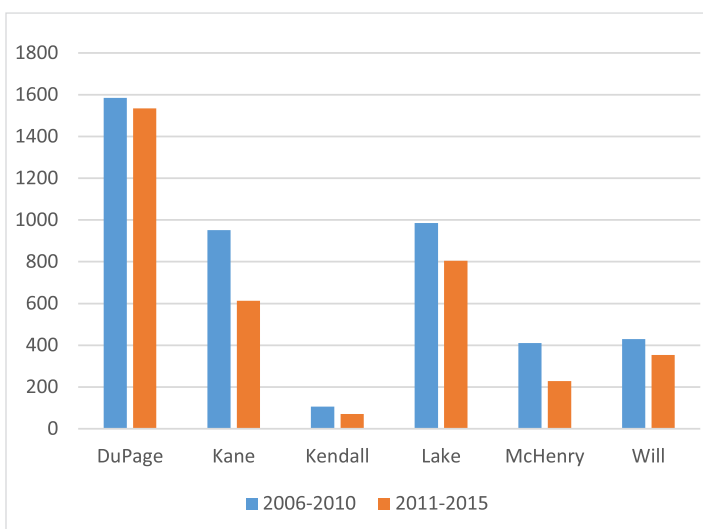
Measuring how many people ride bikes is notoriously difficult. The Chicago region has data on biking to work from Census Bureau surveys but lacks data on biking for other reasons.

Based purely on observations, it appears that biking overall has increased in the suburbs in recent years with more bikes on streets, trails and at Metra stations. However, outside of Cook County, the number of people who report biking to work in Chicago's suburbs has decreased.

The Census Bureau's bike to work data has limitations. For example, there are significant margins of error, and work trips that combine bikes with another mode – such as biking to a Metra station – won't necessarily be counted as biking to work. However, over time these numbers can provide some insight into how people's work travel habits are evolving.

Below we compare the estimated number of bike to work trips in six suburban counties, using the estimates from two five year periods 2006-2010 and 2011-2015.

**Chart 1: Estimated Bike Commute Trips in Collar Counties, 2006-2010 v. 2011-2015**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

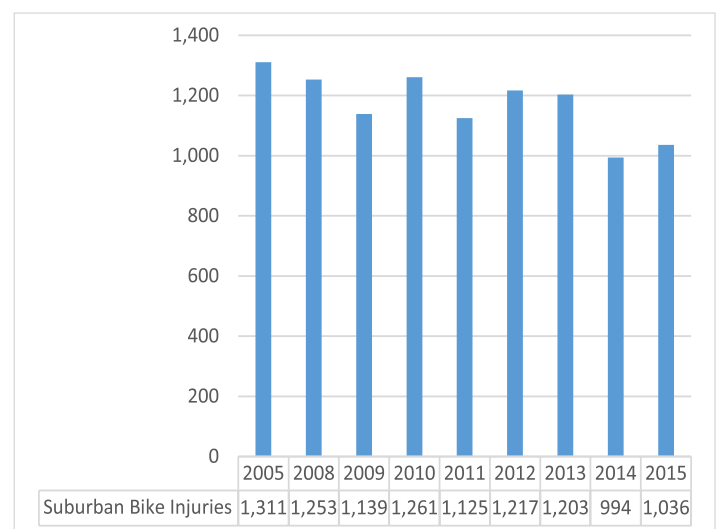
Since 2006, the estimated number of bike to work trips declined in each of the collar counties. Over the same time period, the total number of all types of trips to work increased in each of the counties.

Cook County was excluded from the above chart to avoid distorting the scale, due to the large number of trips estimated in the county. However, between 2006-2010 and 2011-2015, Cook County saw a growth in the estimated number of bike to work trips from 18,235 to 24,502.

## Bike crashes remain stubbornly high

The number of injuries and fatalities related to bike crashes have remained relatively consistent since 2005. Between 2005 and 2015, an average of 10 people were killed annually while biking in Chicago's suburban communities. While approximately 300 fewer bike injuries were reported in 2015 than 2005, the overall number of crashes remains stubbornly high. This lack of progress shows that additional investments in new bike infrastructure and other safety improvements are needed.

**Chart 2: Reported Suburban Bike Injuries 2005-2015**



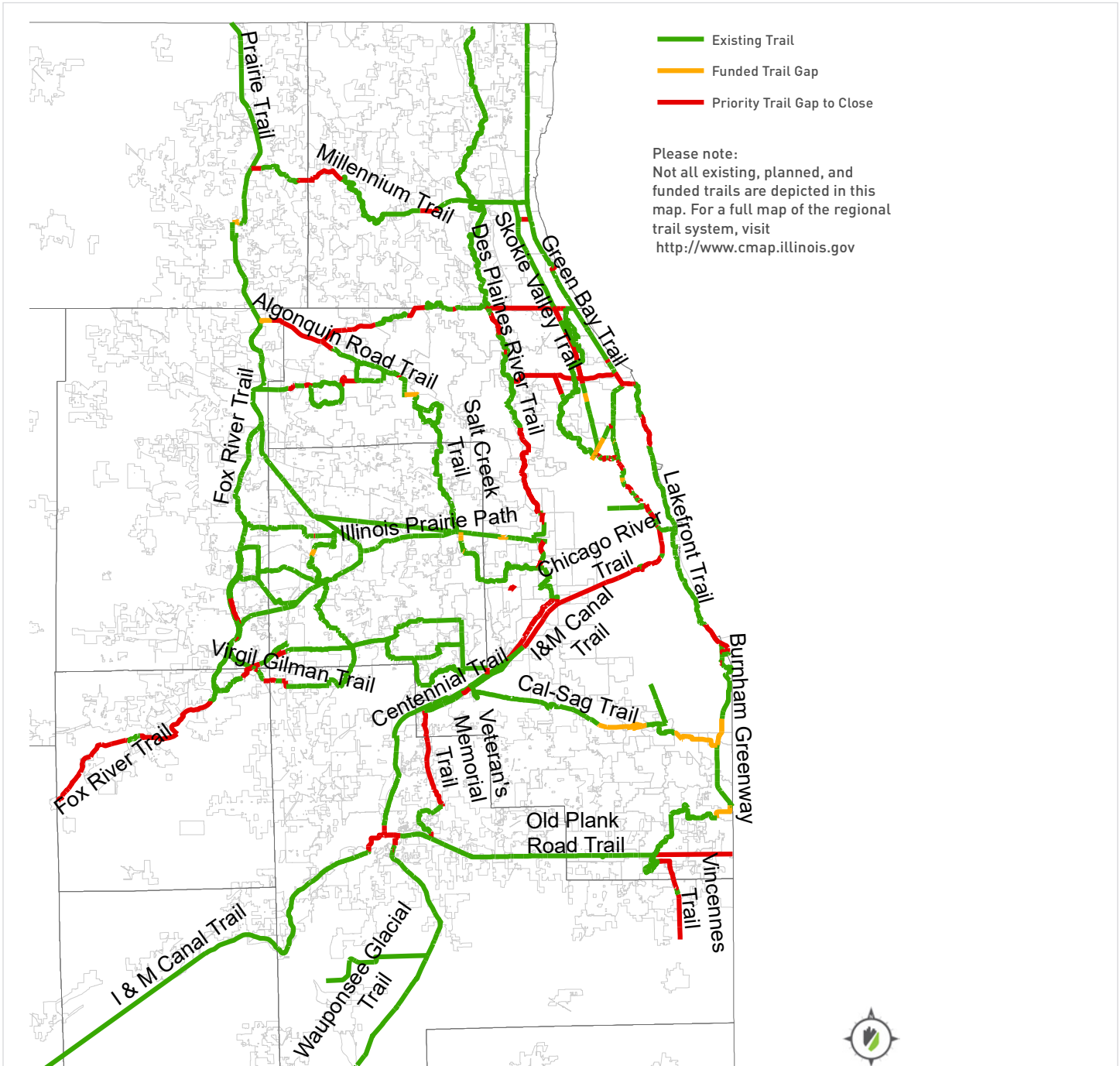
Source: Illinois Department of Transportation 2015 Crash Data. **DISCLAIMER:** The motor vehicle crash data referenced herein was provided by the Illinois Department of Transportation. The author is responsible for any data analyses and conclusions drawn

## Large gaps remain in the regional trail network

Active Trans estimates there are approximately 4,000 miles of trails and paths suitable for biking in the region. While this number is surely impressive, too often these trails are disconnected, leaving communities cut off from one another and forcing people on bikes onto dangerous and stressful streets.

Closing these gaps will create a truly regional network of comfortable and connected low-stress bikeways.

Active Trans has identified 142 miles of trail gaps in our regional network.





## Bike infrastructure solutions

Here we feature examples of comfortable, low-stress bike infrastructure emerging throughout the region.

### Protected bike lanes & cycletracks

Protected bike lanes that are physically separated from vehicle traffic are one of the best ways to improve our streets to make them safe for people who bike. However, this kind of treatment is not yet commonplace in our region's suburbs. Aurora's new curb protected lane through its downtown corridor provides a boon to economic development and livability of the quickly growing community. Evanston also shines with three different examples of protected bike lanes on Church Street, Davis Street and Dodge Avenue.



order to increase access and safety for people of all ages. As part of their Bike-Walk 2030 Plan, Highland Park prioritizes “developing bike routes on low-stress streets, creating new local and regional trail connections, pursuing traffic calming measures and increasing kids walking and biking at schools.”

### Trails

New trail developments are being discussed all around the region. For example, the Cal-Sag Trail, running through Chicago's South Suburbs from Lemont east to Burnham is a 26-mile multi-use path along the Calumet-Sag Channel and Calumet River. Phase 1 of the trail opened in June 2015.

Running along the Des Plaines River from Elmwood Park all the way north to Wisconsin lies the 56-mile Des Plaines River Trail. Certain sections, particularly on the south half of the trail, are in need of upgrade and maintenance. Active Trans is involved in discussions to upgrade the trail by improving existing infrastructure and trail crossings – as well as creating easier access from local communities. Soon, we can plan on a fully refurbished Des Plaines River Trail for all to enjoy.



Active Trans is currently working with suburban communities on pop-up Complete Streets projects that provide a tangible conception of streets that could be more bikeable and walkable. The pop-ups, which have included protected bikeways, have been wildly popular. Our hope is that the communities will make our suggested street treatments permanent through complete streets infrastructure implementation.

### Neighborhood greenways/bike boulevards

Neighborhood greenways and bike boulevards are slower speed, low-traffic roads that have been altered to make biking and walking safer and more comfortable. Oak Park's bike plan puts an emphasis on bike boulevards as a good option for transforming low-traffic residential roads in to streets that give priority to cyclists.

Highland Park's Family Friendly Bikeways commitment similarly prioritizes neighborhood greenways and bike boulevards in







## Bike sharing

Divvy bike-sharing is no longer an amenity solely for city-dwellers. Both Oak Park and Evanston recently welcomed Divvy to the communities. With over 7 million Divvy rides taken since 2013, it's clear that providing access to bikes will greatly increase the bike-ability of any community.

Aurora also recently welcomed bike-sharing this summer via Zagster, Inc. With three centrally located stations downtown near the new protected bike lane, biking in Aurora couldn't be easier.

## Policy planning and funding

Deploying the bike infrastructure mentioned above cannot move forward without the support of local, regional and state policy planning and funding.

## Local actions by suburbs

Here are some steps local suburban communities can take to create better biking infrastructure and encourage more people to ride.

- Pass a local **complete streets policy** to ensure all road users are considered in future transportation plans and projects
- Adopt and implement an **active transportation plan** that creates a connected network of low-stress bikeways, like protected bike lanes and off-street trails
- Pursue **funding** and adopt transportation budgets that

include a fair share for walking and biking, tapping into federal, state and local dollars

- Track progress on local biking goals through **project prioritization and performance metrics**
- Create a forum for community input and accountability by establishing a **bicycle and pedestrian advisory council**
- Incorporate a **vision zero** goal to eliminate traffic fatalities into local plans and policies
- Encourage cycling and improve safety by **calming and slowing traffic** at intersections and on local streets
- Embrace **land use** policies that encourage development that is mixed-used and puts key destinations close together, like schools, work, shopping and residences

## Regional actions

- Prioritize non-motorized modes of transportation like bicycling in the upcoming regional plan, ONTO2050
- Create incentives for bike- and walk-friendly development near transit stations, including expansion of major job centers into mixed use destinations connected by rapid transit
- Ensure regionally programmed funding source, like the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program and Surface Transportation Program, prioritize active modes such as bicycling
- Provide additional training and technical assistance to suburbs with limited staff capacity
- Assist communities with limited local funds in raising local match money for federally funded projects

## State actions

- Invest state dollars in bikeways projects and programs, including targeted support for planning and construction in high-need communities
- Implement the Illinois State Bike Transportation Plan, in particular:
  - » Dedicate state funding for Complete streets facilities like bike lanes and sidewalks, and prioritize such projects
  - » Track the number and quality of complete streets projects





- » Develop biking and walking safety standards and assign adequate “highway safety” funds to achieve the standards
- » Update IDOT design manuals and the Bikeway Selection Tables to reflect modern standards for how best to accommodate biking and walking
- Evaluate and report on the implementation of state Complete Streets to date and make improvements

### Federal actions

- Maintain and grow federal funding sources for biking projects in the Chicago suburbs, including the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) program, Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) and TIGER Grant program.

## Putting the pieces together: Local success stories

While our region has a long way to go before fully achieving *Suburban Bikeways for All*, many communities are already leading the way and taking the local action steps we outlined above.

### Evanston: Complete streets policy sets the stage

With a robust bike plan, impressive infrastructure and a strong culture around biking and walking, Evanston is a model city for active transportation.

Evanston’s recent progress is largely due to its innovative complete streets policy, which was adopted in 2014. The policy is unique in that it incorporates environmental sustainability into the complete streets framework. Therefore, every city right-of-way project falls under the policy purview, including roads, parks and trails.

The city boasts a growing network of protected bike lanes and in 2016, along with Oak Park, became the first suburban community to welcome the Divvy bike share system.

### Bensenville: Active transportation plans cultivate community health

The Village of Bensenville in DuPage County is a diverse community located in Chicago’s Northwest Suburbs close to O’Hare International Airport. The community’s 2016 Active Transportation Plan is a strong example of how transportation planning can help support public health goals.

A 2011 survey showed that almost 20 percent of Bensenville adults were getting no leisure-time activity. In addition, only 22 percent of tenth graders surveyed in 2014 were meeting physical activity recommendations of 60 minutes per day.

A coalition of local officials identified a special grant opportunity that supported projects integrating public health in local planning. The group worked with Active Trans to engage the community in developing the final plan, which was completed in 2016.

Bensenville went on to adopt a complete streets policy and is currently busy planning for specific trail and bike lane improvements to create the connected network as outlined in the plan.



## Chicago Heights: Putting a plan into action

In 2012, Chicago Heights worked with Active Trans, Prevention Partnership and local community leaders to create an active transportation plan to help promote walking and biking in the South Suburban city. Since then, the community has been putting the plan to work, implementing multiple recommendations from the plan.

In 2015, the Old Plank Road Trail was extended through Chicago Heights to connect to the Thorn Creek Trail and fill in a missing piece of the 500-mile Grand Illinois Trail. The city is also looking to extend the Thorn Creek Trail to Vollmer Road and connect to Prairie State University and other bike lanes.

But Chicago Heights isn't just implementing the infrastructure projects from its plans. In recent years, the city has encouraged residents to get involved in bicycling and community building through past events like Open Streets. These two encouragement programs were included in the plan recommendations to offer opportunities for community members to get out and ride their bikes.

Chicago Heights has also created a local bike map and dozens of bike racks made by local high school students have been installed.

## Richton Park: From pop-up to permanent

Richton Park in Chicago's South Suburbs is on the fast track toward becoming a community where people biking and walking can get around safely and easily. The village, which has a population of about 13,600, is one of the suburban Cook County communities participating in the Cook County Health Department's Healthy Hotspot campaign.

Through the program, Active Trans worked closely with the community to develop a complete streets policy and active transportation plan. But local leaders knew putting these plans into action would take community support and creative funding solutions.

To help generate community buy-in, Richton Park and Active Trans produced a pop-up complete streets project on Richton Square Road. The road's wide vehicle lanes, typical of many suburban roadways, enable speeding and make the street

unsafe for people walking and biking. By right-sizing the street and narrowing the traffic lanes to a more appropriate size, the pop-up project created room for a protected bike lane and pedestrian refuge islands. The route also offered connectivity to a school, a Metra station, and an apartment complex. Now, Richton Park is moving ahead with making the pop-up infrastructure into a permanent feature on the street.

And the community is also hard at work seeking funding to implement important projects, pursuing county, state, and federal grants for projects such as a new regional trail connecting 14 communities as well as pedestrian and bike improvements along Cicero Avenue.

## Arlington Heights: Bicycle and pedestrian commission leads the charge

Communities throughout the Chicago region have adopted bicycle plans to encourage safe and easy rides to schools, work, trails and other destinations. Implementation of plans, however, is often challenging due to scarce funding, stretched staff resources and/or competing priorities.

When Arlington Heights adopted its bicycle and pedestrian plan, the village committed to implementing it by establishing a bicycle and pedestrian advisory commission (BPAC) to "assist in the development of comprehensive plans for bikeways within the village."

The commission consists of seven members, residents of the village appointed by the village president with consent of the village board to three-year terms. Importantly, the village provides staff support via an engineering department liaison, who offers feedback about the feasibility of projects and village resources, which can assist in moving them forward.

BPAC members have made impressive progress. They have completed an existing condition report for the bike plan, partnered with the Arlington Heights Memorial Library for biking traffic skills 101 classes, reviewed funding options for signage, developed bike valet systems for community events, and provided breakfast to commuters during Bike to Work Week. In addition to his other responsibilities, former BPAC Chair Peter Szabo took on leadership of the Active Trans Northwest Suburban Council, bringing his expertise of local and regional bike network gaps that needed to be filled.





## Where we go from here

Active Trans will use the priorities, case studies and key messages captured in *Suburban Bikeways for All* to guide our advocacy throughout the region. This platform will enable us to conduct outreach to new allies and champions, build support among elected officials and decision makers and change the narrative around biking in Chicago's suburban communities.

And this work is already happening. From planning for a neighborhood bike route in Highland Park, to supporting the extension of the Old Plank Trail, to working with our suburban active transportation councils to improve trail connections in DuPage County, *Suburban Bikeways for All* will help us connect the dots between local action and a brighter future for our region.

### What you can do to support *Suburban Bikeways for All*

**Get connected:** Sign up for our newsletters and advocacy alerts at [activetrans.org](http://activetrans.org). And don't forget to invite your friends and family to do the same!

**Become a member:** Our members power our work to promote biking, walking and public transit. Log on to [activetrans.org](http://activetrans.org) to find out how to join or renew today.

**Be a leader:** Change starts from the ground up. Reach out to Active Trans advocacy staff to learn how you can start organizing for change in your community. **For more information, contact Maggie Melin [maggie@activetrans.org](mailto:maggie@activetrans.org) or 312-216-0475.**

*This report was made possible by a grant from REI.*





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