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Ambitious proposal would make Chicago River the city's new backyard



By MARY WISNIEWSKI
CHICAGO TRIBUNE | OCT 24, 2016



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Chicago's lakefront is a triumph of city planning — the preservation of the city's chief physical asset for use by the public instead of by factories and wealthy, private homes. It's the city's front yard.

Until recently, the Chicago River has not received the same loving attention. Though Daniel Burnham included riverfront promenades in his 1909 Plan of Chicago, most of the land along the river has long been inaccessible or unappealing — a mix of scrub trees and litter, industry and private property. The river was known mainly for pollution and the fact that it was engineered to flow backward.

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But in the past 20 years, that perception has changed dramatically, with a series of improvements through public and private development. Counting the downtown Riverwalk — the final segment opened to the public this past weekend — the riverfront has about 13 miles of disconnected trails, with another 1.7 miles under construction.

Now, the Active Transportation Alliance, which promotes biking and walking, says it is time to make a Burnham-style big plan for what could be the city's backyard. The alliance laid out a bold vision in a preliminary report last week suggesting ways to make a continuous bike and pedestrian trail along the entire 27-mile Chicago riverfront by 2030.

"The stars are aligning to make this happen, with the popularity of The 606, the popularity of the Riverwalk and a mayor who generally supports these kinds of things," said Ron Burke, the alliance's executive director.

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The alliance's report comes three months after the release of a planning document called "Our Great Rivers," by the Metropolitan Planning Council, Friends of the Chicago River and the city, which also discussed a continuous trail along the river. The alliance's preliminary report took it a step further and supplied details about how it could work. A full report comes out Nov. 16.

The ideas for new trail segments range from the more easily achievable — developers on the riverfront south of the Loop including a trail as part of their project, for example — to more complicated ideas such as putting stationary or floating docks over the water in places where it is tough to build on land. The alliance does not know how much money it could all take but suggests that it could be paid for through a mix of private and public sources, including federal Congestion Mitigation and Clean Air funding.

Josh Ellis, a director of the Metropolitan Planning Council, thinks the trail is "entirely feasible" by 2030, but there needs to be a consortium of government agencies, the private sector and neighborhood groups to work out how to do it. Government participants would include the Park District, the Cook County Forest Preserve, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Coast Guard. Ellis said private charity could step in to handle some of the costs, as was done for Millennium Park.

"I think the experience in Chicago with the Riverwalk, which is just a few blocks, really shows that you can build a space that is not just a trail, but is a destination in its own right," Ellis said. "I think that's the kind of spirit and enthusiasm that's good for the rest of the river too."

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The idea of a long, continuous river trail has precedent in northern Illinois, Ellis said. The Fox River from Aurora to Batavia and St. Charles has trails that go in and out of downtown and forest preserves. The Cal-Sag trail on the Calumet River in the south suburbs is another example.

Outside Illinois, there is a 60-mile-and-growing trail along Pennsylvania's Schuylkill River, including a 25-mile stretch from Philadelphia to Valley Forge. Detroit and Chattanooga, Tenn., also have been investing in river trail projects, according to Christopher Leinberger, a land-use strategist with the George Washington University School of Business.

BREAKING NEWS

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"It's well past time — this should have been done years ago," Leinberger said when asked about a continuous Chicago River trail. He pointed to the boost in economic

development in Minneapolis as a result of bike and pedestrian river trails.

Portland, Ore., has a pedestrian and bicycle trail along the Willamette River, which includes the longest floating dock in the U.S. at 1,200 feet, according to Carol Meyer-Reed, whose design company Meyer/Reed worked with the city and the state of Oregon to design the mile-and-a-half, \$30 million East Bank Esplanade, which opened in 2001. The dock is part of the path, has guardrails and is reached by ramps that adjust for the depth of the water.



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Yellow boom

Keeping the Riverwalk clean has been an ongoing concern now that the work is completed. Earlier in the week there was some floating trash between the Wells and Franklin Street bridges near the floating plant trays, however a look at the area Dec. 9, 2016, shows that trash was removed. (Phil Velasquez / Chicago Tribune)

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Another example of an ambitious trail project is the Atlanta BeltLine, a \$4.8 billion plan to convert unused rail beds circling the southern city's urban core into a 22-mile bike and pedestrian trail, along with a new streetcar line. The project is being funded by private and public money.

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The chance of floating docks for Chicago is what makes the idea of a continuous path possible, said Randy Neufeld, a Chicago cycling advocate and cycling fund director of SRAM, a bike component manufacturer.

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"The ability to use the public space on the river itself changes things," Neufeld said. He said there are some new technologies for docks and there could be competition among companies producing them.

He agreed that a continuous river path is a lofty goal — but things that seemed impossible have happened before, with the right coordination.

"If you were an overly realistic pragmatist you'd never think The 606 would have happened, but it happened and the way it happened was a mix of private and public capital," Neufeld said. The 606, a popular 2.7-mile trail that opened last year, was built on an old railroad bed and cost about \$95 million.

A boat trip last week along the Chicago River showed some of the challenges of building a trail along the river, such as the narrower, industrial sections by Goose Island and the river's run between skyscrapers along Wacker Drive.

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Chicago-area rivers

But there also were places more ready for trail development, such as on Goose Island itself. Another area ripe for a trail is a stretch of land on the east branch of the river north of Ping Tom Park in Chinatown. Targeted for development, the area is now a wilderness of trees, dotted with homeless camps. Herons can be seen perched on wood pilings.

Other opportunities near or along the river include the El Paseo Trail project in Little Village and Pilsen, the south extension of the North Branch Trail, the old Finkl Steel site along the Clybourn Corridor and redevelopment of Lathrop Homes on the North Side, according to the alliance.

"We're closer than you think," said Jim Merrell, the alliance's campaign director. "It is possible." He said off-road trails are the best way to get people to consider getting around by biking or walking, and a trail along the whole river would benefit tourism, the local economy, public health and the environment. About 35 percent of the city's population, or 945,000 people, live within a mile of the river, the alliance said.

Gail Merritt of the Alliance for a Greener South Loop said a river trail would give Chicagoans a better appreciation of nature and conservation.

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"Experiencing birds and growing things is the first step to saying we've got to take care of this," she said.

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Bus and rail ridership

More area transit riders are hopping on a train instead of the bus, according to a report by the Regional Transportation

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A report presented at the RTA board meeting last week revealed that 69 percent of CTA passenger miles in 2015 were on trains, compared with 31 percent on the bus. In 2006, 60 percent of the passenger miles were on the train and 39 percent were on the bus.

The CTA has said the switch from bus to rail ridership reflects a national trend. Trains have an advantage because they don't get stuck in traffic jams, said Jessica Hector-Hsu, RTA director of planning and market development. She noted that high-speed bus services, such as the Pace bus-on-shoulder service on Interstate 55, have had ridership increases.

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CTA buses made the most passenger trips regionally — at 44 percent, compared with 39 percent for CTA rail, 12 percent for Metra and 5 percent for Pace in 2015. Metra was on top in terms of passenger miles, at 40 percent, compared with 36 percent for CTA rail, 16 percent for CTA bus and 6 percent for Pace.

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Transit ridership overall was down between 2011 and 2015, though fare revenue was up, the RTA report found. Revenue was helped by fare increases and riders choosing pay-as-you-go options with Ventra instead of discounted fares such as monthly passes, according to Karin Allen, RTA principal analyst in capital programming and performance analysis.

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Mary Wisniewski is the transportation reporter and Getting Around columnist for the Tribune. She joined the Tribune in 2016 after stints as a general news reporter at Reuters and transportation reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times. She has written an award-winning biography of Chicago novelist Nelson Algren.

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