

I. Introduction

Objectives and Uses of the Plan

The *Ogle County Greenways & Trails Plan* is a long-range, visionary master plan for the green infrastructure of the region. It identifies the resources and opportunities for open space and recreational trail systems, linking communities with one another and with natural and cultural resource sites. The plan emphasizes the unique history and geography of the region and recognizes the relationship between the environment, recreational needs, and economic growth and sustainability. This planning process was initiated by Ogle County municipalities, planning and conservation organizations, and by recreational user groups. It is the intention of the Greenways and Trails Committee and the participating organizations that the *Ogle County Greenways & Trails Plan* be adopted as an amendment to the *Year 2000 Ogle County Amendatory Comprehensive Plan*.

Specifically, this special-purpose master plan serves to:

- Provide a framework for coordinated greenway and trail conservation and development.
- Assist implementing and funding agencies to allocate resources in support of plan priorities.
- Initiate a forum for discussion and resolution of greenway issues among government jurisdictions and private sector interests.
- Provide a basis for coordinating transportation, recreation, water quality, storm and floodwater, wildlife, and related programs to advance conservation or restoration of greenways and reduce conflict with other development activities.
- Increase the understanding and appreciation of Ogle County's natural and cultural resources and to encourage stewardship.

Greenways & Trails Planning Background

Although the concept of greenways can trace its roots to the shaded and scenic "pleasure drives" of the late 19th century, and although the birth of recreational trails linking natural areas and population centers dates back to the inception of the Appalachian Trail in the 1920s, the present Greenways & Trails movement bears a striking resemblance to "Better Roads." The Better Roads movement swept Illinois with the advent of automobiles in the 1910s and 20s and precipitated the statewide network of improved highways as well as planning and improvement at the county level. It can be said that both movements arose out of the desire by the public for improved routes for the purpose of transportation and recreation. Both were initiated everywhere by local interests, not by centralized state leadership. Both started with pressure to improve routes of local importance and grew to envision a network linking routes one to another, providing access across county and state lines. In the 1910s the state responded by requiring each county to appoint a commissioner responsible for creating a county-wide plan.

The term "greenway" was first used by planner Benton MacKaye in his 1921 proposal for the Appalachian Trail, probably the longest and best known of its kind. In the same year, The Friends of the Native Landscape published the results of their survey of the unique ecological and geological resources of Illinois, proposing a state park system. Among the recommended sites was an extensive linear park encompassing the Rock River Valley from Dixon to the bluffs north of Oregon. In *Proposed Park Areas in the State of Illinois*, FONL chairman Jens Jensen of Highland Park advocated preserving land from development in several biologically significant Illinois river valleys. A chapter devoted to "The Rock River Country," extending from Mud Creek above Oregon down to Dixon including Pine Creek, featured dramatic views of the river and its landmark sandstone outcroppings. Another chapter extolled the merits of "The White Pine Forest Tract of Ogle County" and advocated that it be protected as a state park, echoing the goals of a movement that had begun locally years before.

After the state had acquired land for a number of the proposed parks, including the White Pine Forest, in 1938 the Illinois State Plan Commission published the *Illinois Park, Parkway and Recreational Area Plan*. The report noted that the intention of the state law in establishing the park system was to connect the state parks with one another by a system of scenic parkways. Such a linkage would be similar to the boulevards linking the great parks of Chicago or the Forest Preserve system of Cook County. Recognizing that such an extensive parkway system throughout the state was not feasible, the report went on to name a limited number that it thought would be highly feasible. Among them were the Rock River corridor and the Illinois & Michigan Canal corridor with the Hennepin Feeder to Rock Falls on the Rock River. Parkway were defined as "extended strips of land, developed in a natural manner and devoted principally to recreational use. . . . They may lie along a water course or canal, and may feature trails, roadways, and boating."

In 1993, with a growing number of greenways and trails in existence or in the planning stages, citizen representatives attending the first Conservation Congress in Springfield gave broad support to a resolution proposing a greenways and trails planning process to be carried out at each county or metropolitan level. The role of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources would be only to facilitate active, self-sustaining local programs. The intention was that cumulative local planning would result in a grassroots master plan for the entire state. Representatives foresaw that this would provide a rational method for prioritizing the allocation of limited funding by state agencies and also encourage additional support. The resolution recognized that it would never be feasible for the state to undertake acquisition and management of such an extensive network, but that local efforts could carry such plans through to fruition by organizing various partnerships among public agencies, private organizations, and landowners.

Governor Edgar and IDNR launched the new planning process at a Governor's Workshop on Greenways and Trails in 1995. At present in northwestern Illinois, regional plans have been completed in the Quad Cities metro area, Rockford/Boone-Winnebago Counties, Freeport/Stephenson County, Whiteside County, and Lee County. Several other counties are in the preliminary stages of considering such plans.

History of This Plan

At an exploratory meeting August 23, 2001 at the Nash Recreation Center, Oregon, representatives of the Ogle County Board, cities, parks and preserves, and recreational user groups met to explore the need and process for creating a regional greenways plan. Dave Dornbusch of Blackhawk Hills RC&D was asked to lead the organizational phase and assist with obtaining funding for planning purposes. Subsequent meetings were held on September 26, October 30, and November 28, 2001, resulting in the formation of a group to lead the development of the Ogle County greenways plan and a decision to apply to state greenways and trails planning funds. Greg Query of Rochelle was appointed chair of the committee. Additional financial assistance was sought from local agencies, municipalities, the county board, and recreational organizations.

Blackhawk Hills filed an application for IDNR program assistance of \$20,000 on behalf of Ogle County. Following confirmation that IDNR would provide the requested funds, the Greenways and Trails Committee met again and in July 2002 selected the consultant. The total budget, including the costs of administration, consultant fees, production and printing of the final plans, was \$27,300.

Throughout the planning process, the consultant met periodically with the steering committee and the representative of Ogle County, planning & zoning administrator Michael Reibel. The process included an inventory of resources, preparation of a base map, establishment of greenways and trails criteria, development of trail alternatives, hosting of public open houses, prioritizing of proposed trail routes, and approval of the final plan. Open house presentations and public hearings following the preliminary stages of planning were held at public facilities in four locations throughout the county: Rochelle on 1/23/03; Polo on 1/28/03; Oregon on 2/4/03; and Byron Forest Preserve on 2/11/03. At each public meeting, a 2-page informational survey form was distributed to assist with gathering comments and ideas.

The survey results along with a progress report were presented to the Ogle County Regional Plan Commission at its regular meeting, 2/25/03. Subsequently, before preparing a draft of the final plan, public workshops were held on two consecutive weeks, 3/11/03 and 3/19/03, at Nash Recreation Center. The outcome of these workshops was a list of greenways and trails recommendations as well as priorities for action.

The Need for Planning

A system of greenways constitutes the “green infrastructure” of a region. *Webster’s* defines infrastructure as “the substructure or underlying foundation, especially the basic installations or facilities upon which the continuance and growth of a community depends.” Just as we must thoughtfully plan for and invest in our capital infrastructure, so too must we act as stewards and invest in our environmental or green infrastructure. It is an essential, not just an amenity. It is our life support system.

For several decades there has been growing public interest in linear forms of recreation and the desire to protect our natural heritage. At the same time, there are increasing development pressures. Without planning, development inadvertently leads to further fragmentation and degradation of ecosystems. Without a vision of what residents want—and of what might be—and without a concrete plan defining the priorities and

possible courses of action, opportunities may be missed to incorporate greenways and trails into future public and private development plans.

In recent years Ogle County and its residents have exercised leadership in development guidelines, stormwater planning and in recognition of the scenic beauty, ecological qualities, and recreational opportunities. These concerns are identified in the *Comprehensive Plan's* "Goals and Objectives" (pp.22-27), which include the following:

"Reduce the aesthetic and cultural impact of development . . .

"Maintain and enhance the rural, 'small-town' character . . . and create a 'sense of place' . . .

"Preserve the (physical, visual) integrity, stability and beauty of the County and the value of land . . .

"Preserve and protect . . . areas containing significant natural features such as native vegetation, rivers, streams, wetlands, etc. or areas with significant historical and cultural *values* . . .

"Preserve woodlands and wetlands associated with farms that . . . have an important aesthetic and scenic value that contributes to the character of the County.

"Promote land stewardship through . . . the preservation of environmentally sensitive areas.

"Protect and preserve the natural and scenic qualities of the Rock River corridor and other high-quality riparian corridors throughout the county . . .

"Preserve scenic and historic features.

"Protect and enhance existing businesses and economic development that . . . attracts tourism . . ."

The *Ogle County Greenways and Trails Plan* is intended to be the critical tool to help define the county's natural resources and recreational opportunities and integrate them into future economic development and transportation planning. This plan will be useful to open space, environmental, and recreational agencies and jurisdictions at all levels, from municipalities to county, regional, and state. It will assist in linking Ogle to planned greenways and trails in neighboring counties. It is expected that it will be used by conservation and recreational groups and by planning officials to promote and secure funding for local plans and projects that provide better environment, ensure access to recreation for residents and visitors, and preserve a high quality of life throughout the region.