

COMMENCEMENT

Nature connects us to each other. All of creation has developed from natural processes, and thus by instinct, we are drawn back into them. Whether it be a forest, prairie, beach or community park, we desire to escape back into what brought us into existence.

The *Greenways+Blueways 2020 Plan for Northwest Indiana (G+B 2020)* represents a unique look at a number of factors that influence our participation with nature. This plan combines two major areas of focus at the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC) – conservation planning and non-motorized transportation – into a cohesive study examining their close relationship.

Over the course of this document, this relationship will be broken down into core elements for the sake of establishing benchmarks, or baseline data. This in turn will help stakeholders in NW Indiana gauge the progress of proposals, and work together for continued success.

The NW Indiana region offers many wonderful opportunities for us to enjoy our natural environment in a variety of ways. NIRPC proudly presents this plan as our hope to enhance existing attractions, and to expand their reach to all residents.

History

The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC) began as a transportation-focused agency in 1966, covering Lake and Porter Counties. In 1979 LaPorte County joined, and in the 1980s the mission of NIRPC expanded with the establishment of an Environmental Department.

Non-motorized Transportation

NIRPC embarked on its first bikeways map in 1974. While this document highlighted a number of bike-friendly roads in Lake and Porter County, the first true planning effort took place in 1994 with the release of the *Regional Bikeways Plan*, which was produced on the heels of new federal monies dedicated solely to trail development. The plan features an extensive map of potential bicycle routes, both off-and-on road, and has served as the foundation of our network today.

About this time NIRPC established the Transportation Enhancement Committee (named after the federal TE funds for trails), which was charged with oversight of federal funds for trail development in NW Indiana. The Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) was responsible for selecting TE-funded trail projects statewide. Over time NIRPC's TE Committee established a supplemental funding application to INDOT's, and also created the Priority Regional Trails Corridors Map, which has served as the primary tool for regional trail development.

In 2005 the *Regional Bikeways Plan* was updated to reflect the growing interest in pedestrian-based movement and access. The *2005 Ped & Pedal Plan* presented a comprehensive vision for both bicyclists and pedestrians, and proposed a number of policies supporting these modes. Some of these policies were nationally-based, such as Safe Routes to School and Complete Streets.

Although much focus had been afforded to the development of non-motorized networks on land, there had been no formal planning for water routes utilized by canoes and kayaks. That changed with the release of the *Greenways & Blueways Plan* in 2007, funded by the Donnelly Foundation. This document provided the first comprehensive review of potential water trail routes in the region, which will be updated within the pages of this document.

To reflect the growing reach of planning responsibility, NIRPC's TE Committee renamed itself the Ped, Pedal and Paddle Committee (3PC) in 2010. This group of public and private stakeholders meets regularly at NIRPC to review and update federal funding priorities, and educate regional leaders on the benefits of non-motorized activities at their local level.

2010 also represented a banner year for non-motorized growth with the adoption of NIRPC's Complete Streets Policy & Guidelines. This landmark policy placed the concept of Complete Streets squarely into the application processes at NIRPC. It established that all NIRPC-attributable funding projects would have to provide, to the greatest extent possible, Complete Streets design elements in their transportation-based projects. Details about Complete Streets are discussed in the Transportation Chapter.

Along with the Complete Streets policy adoption in 2010 was the update to the *Ped & Pedal Plan*. This document carried forward the goals from the 2005 plan and provided an update to the progress of trail development in the region.

Due to these efforts, the NIRPC region of Lake, Porter and LaPorte Counties currently boasts over 140 miles of regional trail facilities, a staggering increase from 13 miles that existed in 1990. This represents a vivid statement of the effectiveness of NIRPC's non-motorized transportation planning in NW Indiana.

Conservation

The Northwest Indiana region presents robust and plentiful examples of natural beauty. There also exists a seemingly unlimited number of opportunities to expand these areas, and create a unified network of natural systems for conservation and enjoyment alike.

The location of the Indiana Dunes provides our region one of the most ecologically valuable territories in the world today. For well over a century, scientists and enthusiasts alike have marveled at the beauty and natural diversity present. However, the Dunes serve as only one piece of an intricate puzzle of sensitive environmental lands that deserve further study and respect.

NIRPC's Environmental Department has served to advance this appreciation of our diverse natural areas, and bring attention to their conservation and restoration, including wildlife habitat protection. Further goals include aiding water quality improvements through watershed management practices, and the establishment of a Green Infrastructure network. A detailed overview of these and other department endeavors will be explained in Chapter X.

NIRPC's chief avenue for reaching out to regional stakeholders remains the monthly Environmental Management Policy Committee (EMPC). Issues of local and national significance are routinely discussed at these meetings, with prominent speakers brought in to share their insights. NIRPC also reaches out to local schools and participates in events to help promote actions that individual households can enact such as recycling and composting.

Foundation of Plan

The core issue which brought about this plan's unique focus centers upon one word: *greenways*. As described in the 2007 *Greenways & Blueways Plan*:

- A greenway is a corridor of open space. It can vary greatly in scale, from narrow ribbons of open space that run through urban and suburban development to wide corridors that incorporate diverse natural and cultural features.
- A greenway can be land-or-water based. It can incorporate both public and private property, but always provides greater benefits because of its lineal continuity than it would if the continuity was broken.
- Some greenways are primarily recreational corridors, while others function most exclusively for environmental protection and are not necessarily intended for substantial human passage. Some greenways run along stream corridors, shorelines or wetlands; others follow old railway tracks or other land-based features.
- Greenways differ in their location and function, but overall a greenway network will protect natural and cultural resources, provide private or public recreational opportunities, improve and sustain hydrological functions, and enhance the natural beauty and quality of life in neighborhoods and communities.

Clearly greenways can be represented in a variety of ways. In previous plans, NIRPC has divided out greenway uses – either conservation- or water trail-focused (*Greenways & Blueways Plan*), or non-motorized, land-use trails-focused (*Ped, Pedal and Paddle Plan*). Although the division of these greenway-based topics made sense, it was not comprehensive to both.

Combining these planning elements does pose challenges. To aid with an understanding of this merger, NIRPC staff has created a spectrum of uses which provide clarity to the interconnectivity of the three main focus areas of the G&B Plan: conservation, recreation and transportation. The spectrum of uses are shown in Figure I-1.



Figure I-1: Spectrum of Plan Topics

As shown, the spectrum of uses are independent, but also interconnected. Where a conservation focus includes greenways, a recreation focus would involve trails which move people through them. This would be tied together with transportation, primarily walking, biking and paddling, which provide the means for one to experience the outdoors safely and enjoyably.

These interconnected relationships thus expand further into the depths of each focus area to describe and plan for their successful implementation. Examples would include wildlife habitat protections, acquiring abandoned rail rights-of-way for new trails, and complete streets policies which provide accessible non-motorized transportation options to these areas.

The following chapters of the *G+B 2020 Plan* will delve into details on these core spectrum uses. The final chapter will bring these uses together for a unified vision moving forward to 2020 and beyond.

Return of the Greenways Eight

No, not a movie title, but a homage to those key stakeholders which were explained in great detail in the *Greenways & Blueways Plan*. These include:

- Local Governments
- Private Property Owners
- Land Trusts/Advocate Groups
- Linear Corridor Owners
- Developers
- Corporate Property Owners

- Federal, State & Regional Entities
- Institutions of Education

Combined, nearly every resident of the Northwest Indiana region falls into either one or several of these descriptions. Taken together the Greenways Eight are all critical to creating interconnected open space opportunities, either new or restored. The vast majority of land is held in private hands, and thus these stakeholders must be engaged in the process.

A brief overview of each follows below:

Local & County Governments

These are the gatekeepers for all land development decisions, and the frontline entities with which the public engages. These entities craft plans and ordinances, hold regular meetings and elicit public feedback. Also, and quite importantly, they maintain publicly-owned buildings and park facilities.

Private Property Owners

Being a participant in a greenway proposal does not mean opening up private land for public use. Many acres of conserved land are held privately, and provide valuable wildlife habitat, vegetative and water quality benefits. There are many avenues for a landowner to explore to help their land be part of a high-quality ecosystem.

Corporate Property Owners

Large tracks of land, many undisturbed and ecologically valuable, exist as corporate landholdings. Some of these are formerly used properties, or “Brownfields,” have great potential for remediation to become valuable components of a greenway. Stewardship practices by corporations have been important and should be built upon.

Land Trusts/Advocacy Groups

Many non-profit organizations exist in Northwest Indiana to advance conservation practices and promote alternative transportation choices. These groups are key to building partnerships across both public and private sectors that advance our greenways and blueways networks.

Developers

Private land developers hold great potential in championing progressive conservation and alternative transportation designs. Working with this group closely can provide opportunities to expand access to our greenways for all residents to enjoy.

Linear Corridor Owners

Long stretches of undeveloped land are prime for greenway development. The owners of these corridors can help provide unmatched possibilities for trails and habitat connectivity. Many

have already exhibited excellent civic-mindedness in these areas, and there exists similar partnerships with additional owners.

Federal, State & Regional Entities

Providing assistance both educationally and financially, government entities at the national, state and regional level remain valuable partners in greenway development. They also help build partnerships and bring key stakeholders together to discuss issues and plan projects.

Institutions of Education

Region schools, at every level on the education ladder, have been major contributors towards education and research assistance for a variety of conservation initiatives. Bringing students into the mix to establish and maintain greenways will promote an awareness and environmental ethic at an early age.

Throughout this document, these eight major stakeholders will be mentioned frequently. Their involvement is nothing short of vital for the successful implementation of greenway-related projects.