

We had to hurry. My friends and I had slept late on a beautiful Minnesota morning, and now we had to keep an eye on the clock as we excitedly filled water bottles and buckled helmets. We'd planned an epic urban ride, but we had to get cycling soon or the spring sun would slip away.

I'd puzzled together a 60-mile route that would take us to scenic rivers, historic neighborhoods, rural ponds teeming with wildlife, and at least one quality ice cream stop. We would simply trail-hop our way across some of the best off-street cycling the Twin Cities offer.

On this lilac-infused day, others had similar plans. Tree-lined Minnehaha Trail, just a mile from my house, was a blur of dog-walkers and in-line skaters. The Mendota Bridge's bike lane hummed with cyclists crossing the Mississippi River. On the Big Rivers Trail hugging the bluffs near St. Paul, runners pushed strollers, while pleasure boats buzzed the river beneath us.

The idea of trail-hopping—taking one trail to connect with another—is probably as old as the first intersection of dirt paths. Recently planners in numerous cities including Minneapolis-St. Paul, Seattle and Chicago have begun to knit together networks of trails that offer options to trail users of all kinds. Rail-trails, like the Burke-Gilman in Seattle, the Illinois Prairie Path near Chicago and the Gateway Trail near St. Paul, often form the backbones of such systems.

Whether they serve urbanites who want to explore beyond the cityscape, suburban residents coming to the core to work or play or people who just want a non-motorized way to get to the neighborhood video store, trail networks contribute to a sense of city livability. The extensive system in the Twin Cities, with its tantalizing array of trails, is a compelling reason I choose to live here.

"Trails are one of the ingrained cultural and quality-of-life elements that contribute to Minnesota's 'good life,'" says Donald Pflaum, a cyclist and transportation engineer for the city of Minneapolis. That good life has been recognized by

Minneapolis

The Stone Arch Bridge is a link in downtown Minneapolis' St. Anthony Falls Heritage Trail.



By Robyn Dochterman

Links to Life : Urban



Chicago

Bicyclists can leave their bikes safely stored in downtown Chicago's Millennium Park Bike Station before taking in the city sights.

numerous organizations and magazines, many of which have named the Twin Cities among the most clean, healthy and livable places in the nation.

Trail Visionaries

The area's many recreational facilities and green spaces are a reason the Twin Cities area lands on those lists so frequently. Back in the 1930s, former Minneapolis parks superintendent Theodore Wirth, dean of the local Parks movement in America, dramatically expanded the city's park system. Then in 1974, lawmakers began acquiring and developing trails to connect the parks in the system. Today there are nearly 300 miles



existing and planned parks and greenbelts within the city limits. Today the system is a diverse mix of recreation and commuter trails.

Chicago's system is the cradle of the rails-to-trails movement. In 1963 May Theilgaard Watts ignited a new era in recreation when she wrote a letter to the *Chicago Tribune* urging that the unused Chicago, Aurora & Elgin Railway be transformed into a long-distance footpath, much like the ones she'd seen in England. The resulting Illinois Prairie Path has become a major link to other trails serving suburban and rural users.

More recently, Mayor Richard M. Daley's leadership has helped the city of Chicago earn a national reputation for its growing inventory of greenways and bike-friendly facilities. More than 100 miles of bike lanes complement a bevy of new trails and the signature route, the 18-mile Lakeshore Trail.

Making Connections

Although park and trail systems evolve in ways specific to each city's geographic, political and cultural cli-

mate, they share many common ideals and challenges. For instance, planners around the country say they are seeing—and responding to—a greater demand for trails that provide ways to get from “here” to “there.” Peter Lagerwey, bike and pedestrian program coordinator at the Seattle Department of Transportation, says, “When it comes to trails, you need systems or they don't get used. A lot of it has to do with connectivity.”

Cyclists, certainly, crave long rides, but the trail systems are more than just loops for the toe-clip crowd. Trails are more apt to be integrated into the rhythm of everyday life if people do not have to cross barriers to access them. At the neighborhood level, they might serve as a place to learn to skateboard or be a safe route to school. At the city level, they might provide a pleasant, energy-efficient way to get to the store to buy bread. At the regional level, they might be the perfect way to explore a historic neighborhood with family or go adventuring with friends.

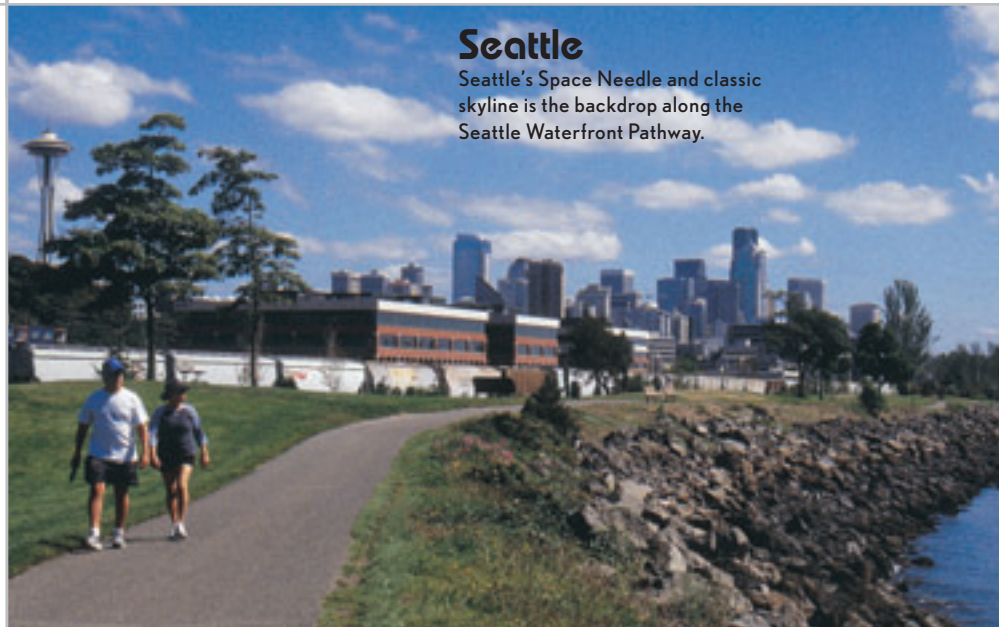
Connecting all those trails—across cities, counties and regions—can be a

n Trail

Networks

of trails in the seven-country metropolitan area and another 500 miles planned by cities, counties, regional authorities and the state. Among the highlights of the existing system are a lattice of rail-trails, numerous regional parks joined by trails and the “Chain of Lakes,” a paved trail connecting a series of in-city lakes strung like pearls on a necklace.

Seattle's park system is largely the vision of the Olmsted brothers, who inherited the nation's first landscape architecture firm from their famous father, Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York's Central Park. The dominant feature of the Olmsted plan for Seattle was a 20-mile landscaped boulevard linking most of the



Seattle

Seattle's Space Needle and classic skyline is the backdrop along the Seattle Waterfront Pathway.

challenge. David Hiller, an advocacy specialist for the Cascade Bicycle Club of Seattle, says his group of 5,500 cyclists often offers comments on design of trails and works with agencies to improve conditions. "To realize the greatest public benefit, multi-use trails should enhance connectivity and efficiently link origins to destinations, housing to jobs and schools and people to places," he explains.

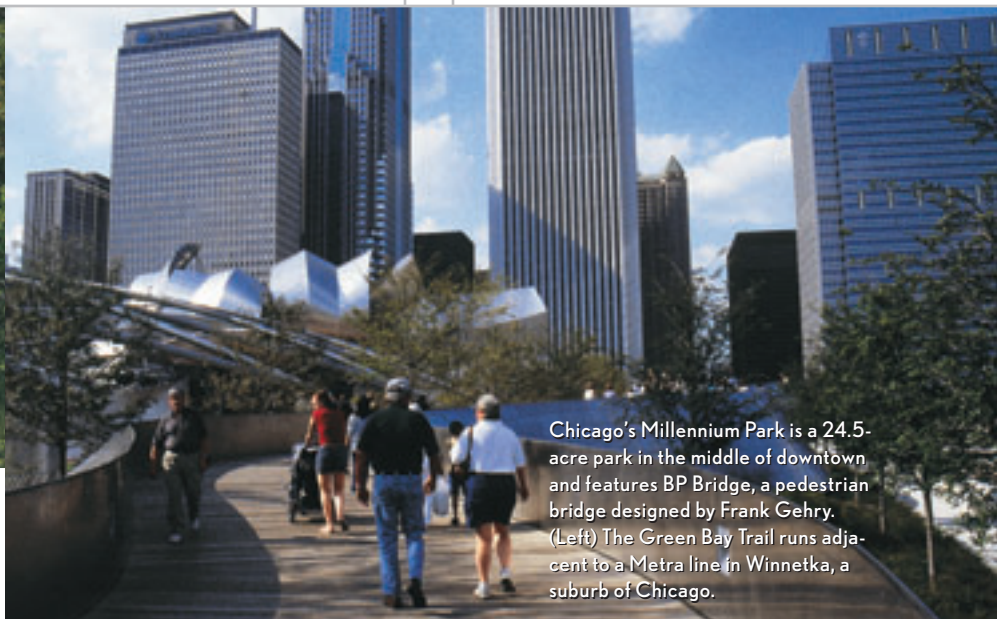
To help determine what connector routes are most needed in Chicago,

A parks researcher for the Metropolitan Council, an organization that manages the extensive regional park system in the Twin Cities area, Jonathan Vlaming views connectivity "as an expansion in scope, to include trails whose primary draw is their connection to regional parks and the trail network."

That focus was evident everywhere on my spring ride. When my friends and I reached the end of the Big Rivers Trail at Lilydale Regional Park,

through northern St. Paul suburbs and past connections to trail systems in suburbs Mahtomedi and White Bear Lake. One moment the Gateway felt urban as we cruised by apartment buildings and shopping centers. The next it was practically pastoral, undulating past fields, woods and ponds where turtles sunned themselves on lake logs and spring peepers croaked out to potential mates.

As we began our ride back toward the city, we crossed paths with other



Chicago's Millennium Park is a 24.5-acre park in the middle of downtown and features BP Bridge, a pedestrian bridge designed by Frank Gehry. (Left) The Green Bay Trail runs adjacent to a Metra line in Winnetka, a suburb of Chicago.

the city Department of Transportation (DOT) is doing its homework. The department not only surveyed all the city streets in 2000 to determine the most appropriate bicycle routes, but also is asking cyclists themselves. "We're asking people where they are coming from and where they are going," says DOT bicycle program coordinator Ben Gomberg. "You're only as good as your missing link."

Recreation and Commuting

While some trails connect communities to museums or restaurants, many begin or end at, or traverse parks. They're a favorite destination of trail users since they often represent the confluence of comfort: bathrooms, refreshments, shade, water and parking. The newly completed Major Taylor Trail, a seven-mile trail on the south side of Chicago, is an example of the trend. The trail links one of the city's oldest African American neighborhoods to the Dan Ryan Woods at one end and Whistler Woods at the other. Both parks are county forest preserves.

we were able to continue our ride to downtown St. Paul on bike paths. We crossed the river and found the Bruce Vento Trail. Named in honor of a Minnesota congressman, the trail is a paved strip along the former Burlington Northern railroad right-of-way. It traces a historic path through Swede Hollow, an old immigrant neighborhood successively populated by workers of Swedish, Polish and Italian descent. Currently the area around the trail is being redeveloped into a nature sanctuary.

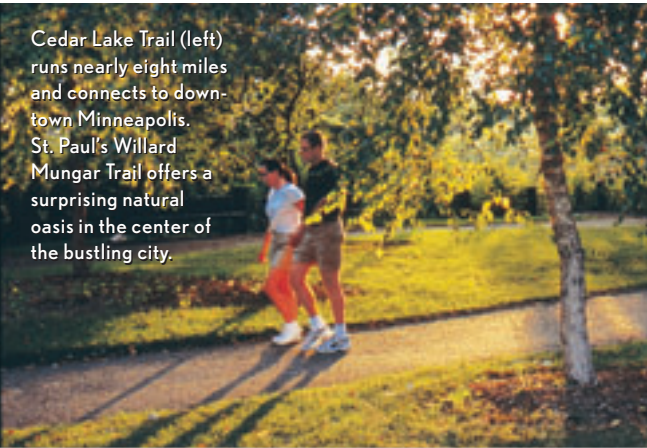
On the other end, the trail reaches Phalen Park. Here bikeways meet like spokes on a wheel at Lake Phalen—Wheelock Parkway (an on-road bike route) from the west, Johnson Parkway from the south (also a bike route) and our next trail, the off-road Gateway Trail to the northeast. We followed the old Soo Line path

weekend riders. On a workday, we would certainly see commuters. Although the Twin Cities area is known more for recreational riding, newer trails such as the Cedar Lake Trail and Kenilworth Trail, both of which connect western suburbs with downtown Minneapolis, are helping make it easier for cyclists to ride to work.

Chicago's commuting evolution is farther along. The city has installed 10,000 bike racks so bike parking is convenient just about everywhere. Last summer the city cut the ribbon on a 16,448-square-foot, heated bike station at Millennium Park. Modeled after bike stations on the West Coast, including one in Seattle, the Chicago facility offers free parking for 300 bikes and includes shower facilities and lockers, bike rentals and repairs and a café.



Cedar Lake Trail (left) runs nearly eight miles and connects to downtown Minneapolis. St. Paul's Willard Mungar Trail offers a surprising natural oasis in the center of the bustling city.



Going Multi-Modal

The bike station in Chicago is located next to the Metra train station and McCormick Place Busway, which allows cyclists and skaters to combine different types of transportation to reach their destinations. Multi-modal options are especially useful if people live too far from work to commute by bicycle or skates, or have no direct trail to their destination.

In the Chicago suburbs, marked bike routes and bike lanes connect to active passenger rail transit, again offering the option of multi-modal trips. "People use these facilities to get to and from the trains for daily commutes," says Tom Murtha, chief transportation planner for the Chicago Area Transportation Study.

Multi-modal trips can combine walking, skating or bicycling with rides in buses, trains or autos. In Seattle, ferries often form a segment of multi-modal trips. Residents of the many islands near Seattle ride their bicycles to ferries, then park them and board a ferry to cross Puget Sound to reach their workplaces downtown.

Others might take their bicycles on the ferry and continue their commute along the Burke-Gilman Trail corridor, which serves the University of Washington and other employment centers.

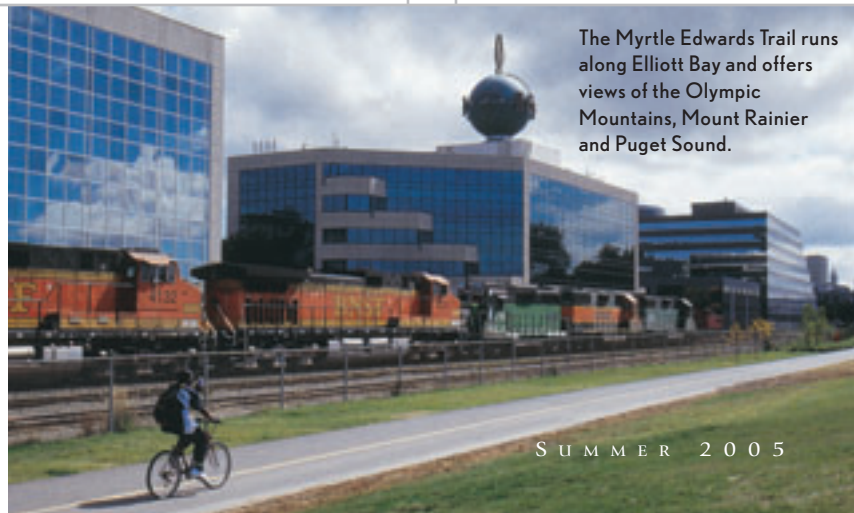
Back in St. Paul, our group headed west toward Minneapolis till we crossed the Mississippi again. In a year or two, the Midtown Greenway trail will extend to the river here. Currently two-thirds complete, the Greenway is a quiet path through a busy city center, and it already has expanded Minneapolis's multi-modal options. Near Lake Street, it intersects with the Hiawatha Light Rail line, a train route that opened in 2004.

The Hi-Li zips south from downtown Minneapolis to Fort Snelling State Park and on to the Twin Cities International Airport and the Mall of America in the suburb of Bloomington. Since bicycles are welcome on the train any time (many other cities limit the hours bikes are allowed) commuters can make an easy connection to either perpendicular axis. Tim Springer, executive director of the Midtown Greenway Coalition, says

the Greenway's role is one of connection. "It connects the urban core with the suburbs and connects the lakes to the [Mississippi] river. It connects to the huge University of Minnesota campus and provides an opportunity for riding in a loop."

The sweet smell of basswood tree blooms floated in the air as I coasted up onto the sidewalk in front of my house. I put my bike away and tugged at the Velcro on my shoes, tired but triumphant at having seamlessly crossed so much of the Twin Cities in our day's ride. There's something to be said for the familiarity of a well-worn linear path, of course. But thanks to citizen advocates, city planners and forward-thinking legislators, I could connect a crazy quilt of routes. Thanks to so many trail options, I could choose my own path.

An avid cyclist, Robyn Dochterman is an editor for Startribune.com, the Minneapolis Star Tribune Web site. Her favorite local trail at the moment is a hilly loop at Elm Creek Park Reserve, which connects to two regional trails in the Twin Cities.



The Myrtle Edwards Trail runs along Elliott Bay and offers views of the Olympic Mountains, Mount Rainier and Puget Sound.

