DuPage County, Illinois

PROFILE:
POPULATION: 927,987
MEDIAN INCOME: $77,441
MEDIAN HOME VALUE: $309,800
% W/ BACHELOR’S DEGREE: 45.6%
WALK SCORE: N/A

KEY FACTS:
574 miles: length of Grand Illinois Trail which includes part of the Illinois Prairie Path
25,121 acres: total lands in DuPage County Forest Preserves accessible by bicycling and walking

QUOTES:
“DuPage County is fortunate to have an extensive trail system that links 17 communities. I invite residents to explore our trail system for safe commuting and recreational use.”
— Dan Cronin, DuPage County Board Chairman

LINKS:
www.dupageco.org/bikeways
www.ipp.org

REPORTS:
2012 County Trail Report

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
National Office
Tracy@railstotrails.org
202.974.5110

Creating Regional Connections

Fifty years ago, when the phrase "rail-trail" hadn’t yet entered the American lexicon, a naturalist took note of out-of-service railroad tracks in DuPage County, Ill. The Chicago, Aurora and Elgin Railroad (CA&E) had built an extensive interurban railway. In that unused right-of-way, May Theilgaard Watts saw enormous potential. She imagined this corridor becoming the spine of an extensive trail network.

On September 25, 1963, she published a letter to the editor in the Chicago Tribune to share her vision. "The right-of-way of the Aurora electric road lies waiting," she wrote, painting quite an image for the future. She continued, "Imagine yourself going for a walk on an autumn day. Choose some part of the famed Illinois footpath. Where the highway crosses it, you enter over a stile. The path lies ahead, curving around a hawthorn tree, then proceeding under the shade of a forest of sugar maple trees, dipping into a hollow with ferns, then skirting a thicket of wild plum, to straighten out for a long stretch of prairie, tall grass prairie, with big blue stem and blazing star and silphium and goldenrod."

Transportation connects people and places. It provides access to jobs, education, shopping, transit and recreation. Safe walking and bicycling facilities enable the success of transit systems by serving as the last mile connection from trains and buses to homes and offices. Active transportation also can replace short neighborhood trips by vehicle. Watts’ vision for DuPage County has continued and flourished.

DuPage County is a collection of diverse communities west of Chicago. The county defies the generalization of bedroom-commuter suburbs. Instead it has two of the largest cities in Illinois, numerous large employers and complex transportation patterns. All this means that county residents have many destinations scattered around the county and
the broader metropolitan region.

DuPage County also has an obesity problem. Nearly 30 percent of children in the county are overweight or obese. To combat this childhood obesity problem, the county launched the Forward Initiative. This multi-agency, private-public collaboration seeks to promote healthy and active living among the county’s one million residents. With 25 percent of these residents’ children, the initial focus was on childhood obesity.

The Forward Initiative had the good fortune of focusing on a region with a strong nucleus of trail and active transportation facilities. Indeed, the very first rail-to-trail conversion project, the Illinois Prairie Path, winds its way through the county. Today, DuPage County has more than 486 miles of inter-connected trails and other bikeways. This extensive bike system is built around the combined 75-mile Illinois Prairie Path and Great Western Trail network.

The beauty of the DuPage County bikeways system is how it facilitates connections. Part of the Illinois Prairie Path is located adjacent to commuter rail, thus making connections to the extensive Metra Rail regional network. The eastern terminus of the Illinois Prairie Path is a busy rapid transit station. The trails network reaches most of the communities in the county with safe neighborhood connections via sidepaths and local trails.

May Watts’ inspired advocacy continues today in DuPage County. The county houses two Bicycle Friendly Communities — Elmhurst and Naperville. The Illinois Prairie Path not-for-profit corporation provides in-kind services to help maintain and enrich the trail. And the county’s extensive Safe Routes to School program is introducing more and more children to the joys of healthy, safe active transportation.