

GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL®

ROUTE ASSESSMENT REPORT
MAY 2025

RAILS TO
Trails
conservancy

ILLINOIS



Hennepin Canal Parkway | Photo by TrailLink user jfahler

The Great American Rail-Trail route across Illinois incorporates the majority of the northern leg of the Grand Illinois Trail between Lansing, Illinois, and the Quad Cities along the Mississippi River. The iconic Illinois & Michigan Canal State Trail and Hennepin Canal Parkway make up almost 75% of the existing miles that the Great American Rail-Trail route will use to cross Illinois. Some strategic investments can help complete the roughly 25 miles of trail remaining to be built to fully connect the Great American Rail-Trail across Illinois.

TABLE 14: GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL MILEAGE IN ILLINOIS

Total Great American Rail-Trail Existing Trail Miles in Ill. (% of Total State Mileage)	165.4 (86.8%)
Total Great American Rail-Trail Gap Miles in Ill. (% of Total State Mileage)	25.1 (13.2%)
Total Trail Gaps in Ill.	4
Total Great American Rail-Trail Miles in Ill.	190.5

GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE ASSESSMENT 2025

MAP 7: ILLINOIS





Great River Trail | Photo by TrailLink user Ikgatu

TABLE 15: GREAT AMERICAN RAIL-TRAIL ROUTE THROUGH ILLINOIS

Existing Trail or Trail Gap Name	Length in Ill. Along Great American Rail-Trail (in Miles)
Pennsy Greenway (Ind.–Ill. State Line to Lansing)	0.5
TRAIL GAP 27 – Lansing Greenway	2.2
Thorn Creek Trail	10.4
Old Plank Road Trail	21.7
TRAIL GAP 28 – Joliet	3.5
Illinois & Michigan Canal State Trail	60.8
TRAIL GAP 29 – LaSalle to Bureau Junction	14.6
Hennepin Canal Parkway	59.7
TRAIL GAP 30 – Colona to Silvis	4.8
Grand Illinois Trail (East Moline)	2.9
Beacon Harbor Parkway Trail	1.1
Great River Trail	7.7
Crossing the Mississippi River	0.6
Total Miles	190.5
Existing Trail Miles	165.4
Trail Gap Miles	25.1

PENNSY GREENWAY (INDIANA-ILLINOIS STATE LINE TO LANSING)

Total Length / Total Length Along Great American Rail-Trail in Ill. (in Miles)	14.4 / 0.5
Surface Type	Asphalt
Trail Managers	Forest Preserves of Cook County, Lake County Parks, Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission, Schererville Parks & Recreation
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/pennsy-greenway

The Pennsy Greenway is currently open between Schererville, Indiana, and Calumet City, Illinois. The existing sections of trail in Indiana are discussed in more detail in the Indiana chapter of this report.

TRAIL GAP 27 – LANSING GREENWAY

Planning Status	Partially planned
Funding Status	Partially funded
Construction Status/ Expected Completion Date	TBD

There is a 2.2-mile gap in the Lansing trail network between the Pennsy Greenway and the Thorn Creek Trail. The Village of Lansing recently confirmed a trail routing to complete this gap, which will be called the Lansing Greenway. In 2020, Lansing received a grant from the Invest in Cook program for \$155,000 to complete the preliminary engineering to close this gap. The village is currently working to implement the grant and will turn its attention to trail construction once the preliminary engineering is completed.

There is currently also an effort underway to consider a more direct trail connection from the Pennsy Greenway in Schererville to the eastern end of the Old Plank Road Trail in Chicago Heights. If this project moves forward, RTC will discuss with local partners if and how the Great American Rail-Trail should be rerouted across the Indiana-Illinois border.

THORN CREEK TRAIL

Total Length / Total Length Along Great American Rail-Trail in Ill. (in Miles)	17.7 / 10.4
Surface Type	Asphalt
Trail Manager	Forest Preserves of Cook County
Website	fpdcc.com/places/trails/thorn-creek-trail-system
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/thorn-creek-trail

The Thorn Creek Trail offers a paved 17-mile route traveling through woodlands and several communities on the southern outskirts of Chicago. The Forest Preserves of Cook County championed and currently maintains the Thorn Creek Trail. The Thorn Creek Trail will host the Great American Rail-Trail for 10.4 miles, connecting Thornton south to Chicago Heights. The Thorn Creek Trail is part of the Grand Illinois Trail system.

OLD PLANK ROAD TRAIL

Total Length / Total Length Along Great American Rail-Trail in Ill. (in Miles)	21.7 / 21.7
Surface Type	Asphalt
Trail Managers	Forest Preserve District of Will County, Old Plank Road Trail Management Commission, Rich Township, Village of Frankfort, Village of Matteson, Village of Park Forest
Website	oprt.org
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/old-plank-road-trail

The Old Plank Road Trail travels 21.7 miles west from Chicago Heights to Joliet across a densely populated suburban landscape. The trail follows what was once a trail created and used by indigenous peoples around Lake Michigan that was later used by fur trappers and early settlers. Business interests later acquired the trail for the old Michigan Central Railroad line. The Old Plank Road Trail is part of the Grand Illinois Trail system.

TRAIL GAP 28 – JOLIET

Planning Status	Unplanned
Funding Status	Unfunded
Construction Status/ Expected Completion Date	TBD

There is a 3.5-mile gap through Joliet between the Old Plank Road Trail and the Illinois & Michigan Canal State Trail. The city of Joliet and the Forest Preserve District of Will County have identified three potential routes to complete this gap through the city. All three options require further study, including solutions for crossing the Des Plaines River.

ILLINOIS & MICHIGAN CANAL STATE TRAIL

Total Length / Total Length Along Great American Rail- Trail in Ill. (in Miles)	79.5 / 60.8
Surface Type	Asphalt, crushed stone, grass, gravel
Trail Managers	Forest Preserve District of Will County, Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • iandmcanal.org • www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/HennepinCanal.aspx
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/illinois--michigan-canal-state-trail/

The 79.5-mile Illinois & Michigan Canal State Trail follows the Illinois and Michigan Canal alongside the Illinois River. It traverses the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor, designated in 1984 as the first National Heritage Area in the United States. Along the trail are multiple state parks, historical sites and opportunities to observe wildlife. The Illinois & Michigan Canal State Trail will host the Great American Rail-Trail for 60.8 miles to connect the village of Rockdale, southwest of Joliet, to LaSalle at the Illinois River.



Old Plank Road Trail | Photo by TrailLink user antonlove1

TRAIL GAP 29 – LASALLE TO BUREAU JUNCTION

Planning Status	Partially planned
Funding Status	Unfunded
Construction Status/ Expected Completion Date	TBD

A 14.6-mile gap exists between the western terminus of the Illinois & Michigan Canal State Trail in LaSalle and the eastern terminus of the Hennepin Canal Parkway in Bureau Junction. A study was conducted in 2013 to review alternatives for filling this gap, which included a circuitous trail route and a signed, on-street route. It was determined that neither option would move forward. A separate study was completed in 2024 to assess the feasibility of completing a rail-with-trail along the active rail corridor that parallels the Illinois River. The route was determined to be largely feasible given several statewide criteria, and work is underway to align the political and funding interests for further design and potential project construction. A local committee was formed to support this effort (Canal Trail Connector, Inc.), which consists of engaged and well-connected members who are leading this effort.



Hennepin Canal Parkway | Photo by Ryan Cree

HENNEPIN CANAL PARKWAY

Total Length / Total Length Along Great American Rail-Trail in Ill. (in Miles)	104.5 / 59.7
Surface Type	Asphalt, crushed stone
Trail Manager	Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Website	www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/HennepinCanal.aspx
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/hennepin-canal-parkway

The 104.5-mile Hennepin Canal Parkway, administered by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources as a state park, follows an old towpath along the Hennepin Canal, first opened in 1907. The canal was originally built to link the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. Most of the various locks and aqueducts necessary to span the 105-mile distance are still in place, and the entire canal is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Hennepin Canal Parkway will host the Great American Rail-Trail for 59.7 miles, connecting Bureau Junction to Colona, the western terminus of the Hennepin Canal Parkway.

TRAIL GAP 30 – COLONA TO SILVIS

Planning Status	Partially planned
Funding Status	Unfunded
Construction Status/ Expected Completion Date	TBD

In 2022, the city of East Moline completed a 2.9-mile portion of Trail Gap 30 between the town of Silvis and the Mississippi River, described below as the Grand Illinois Trail (East Moline). This was part of a years-long plan to fill the gap in the trail network between the Hennepin Canal Parkway and the Mississippi River, also known as the Critical Gap Connector in the Grand Illinois Trail. The towns of Carbon Cliff and Silvis are coordinating to determine the best route to complete the remaining 4.8 miles of this gap, and progress should be forthcoming.

GRAND ILLINOIS TRAIL (EAST MOLINE)

Total Length / Total Length Along Great American Rail-Trail in Ill. (in Miles)	2.9 / 2.9
Surface Type	Asphalt, concrete
Trail Manager	City of East Moline
Website	www2.illinois.gov/dnr/recreation/greenway-sandtrails/Pages/GrandIllinoisTrail.aspx
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/grand-illinois-trail-(east-moline-to-silvis)

The city of East Moline opened a roughly 3-mile section of the Grand Illinois Trail in the fall of 2022. It is a part of the regional trail system and connects the town of Silvis to the Mississippi River.

BEACON HARBOR PARKWAY TRAIL

Total Length / Total Length Along Great American Rail-Trail in Ill. (in Miles)	1.1 / 1.1
Surface Type	Concrete
Trail Manager	City of East Moline
Website	qctrails.org/trails/trail/7th-street-the-quarter-trail
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/beacon-harbor-parkway-trail

The Great American Rail-Trail will utilize 1.1 miles of an existing trail that heads west along 13th Avenue in East Moline. The trail leads to the East Moline City Office on Beacon Harbor Parkway. Near the Beacon Harbor welcome center, which faces the Mississippi River, the city recently invested in benches and upgrades to the trail. A large development is planned for this area, including a hotel that could increase the desire for trails and act as a logical trailhead for visitors.

GREAT RIVER TRAIL

Total Length / Total Length Along Great American Rail-Trail in Ill. (in Miles)	62.5 / 7.7
Surface Type	Asphalt
Trail Managers	City of East Moline, City of Moline, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Rock Island County Forest Preserve District, Village of Hampton, Village of Port Byron, Village of Rapids City
Website	qctrails.org/trails/trail/great-river-trail
TrailLink Map	traillink.com/trail/great-river-trail

The Great River Trail is a 62.5-mile trail that travels along the banks of the Mississippi River between Savanna and Rock Island, Illinois. The Great River Trail will host the Great American Rail-Trail for 7.7 miles, heading southwest from East Moline to Rock Island.

CROSSING THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

The Quad Cities provide two trail crossings of the Mississippi River from which Great American Rail-Trail users can choose. The Government/Arsenal Bridge is a multimodal bridge that contains a bicycle and pedestrian element and crosses between Rock Island, Illinois, and Davenport, Iowa. In 2021, the Iowa-Illinois Memorial Bridge (I-74 Bridge) was completed, providing a new multimodal crossing of the Mississippi River between East Moline, Illinois, and Bettendorf, Iowa. Both bridges are about the same length and accommodate trail users.

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Abandoned rail corridor – When a railroad company ceases operations on a line or terminates the line itself. Abandonment is official when the Surface Transportation Board (STB) has issued an order authorizing abandonment of the line and the railroad has notified the STB that it has consummated the abandonment authorization.

Active rail corridor – Any rail corridor that has not been formally abandoned through the process identified by the Surface Transportation Board.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – The federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability.

Arterial road – A major thoroughfare, particularly one used to provide a large traffic capacity for traveling longer distances.

Ballast – The trackbed upon which railroad ties are laid, often composed of crushed stone.

Bike lane – A portion of the roadway that has been designated by striping, signage and pavement markings for the preferential or exclusive use of bicyclists.

Bike route – On-street routes that are signed for bicycle travel but do not provide any physical or visual separation from automobile traffic.

Bollard – A short post used to divert traffic from an area or road.

Contiguous – Sharing a common border; touching.

Culvert – A tunnel carrying a stream or open drain under a road, railroad or trail.

Decking – The surface of a bridge.

Federal Railroad Administration – An agency within the U.S. Department of Transportation that handles matters related to the railroad industry.

Geographic Information System (GIS) – A system designed to capture, store, manipulate, analyze, manage and present spatial or geographic data.

Greenway – A strip of undeveloped land, set aside for recreational use or environmental protection.

Interim on-road connector – An on-road segment that is to be used temporarily while a trail is being planned or built.

Multiuse trails – Trails that are designed to accommodate more than one type of use (walking, bicycling, horseback riding, etc.).

Non-motorized trails – Trails that do not allow travel using vehicles with motors.

Off-road trails – Trails that are outside of a roadbed for motorized vehicles.

Protected bike lane (cycle track) – A bikeway that is at street level and uses a variety of methods for physical protection from passing traffic. Protected bike lanes (cycle tracks) can allow bicycle movement in one or both directions on one side of a road.

Railbanked/railbanking – Condition allowing a railroad to “bank” a corridor for future rail use. During the interim, alternative trail use is a viable option.

Railbed – The roadbed of a railroad track.

Rail corridor – The tracks and railroad right-of-way (generally 50 to 100 feet wide, though it varies widely by geography).

Rail-trail – The conversion of a disused railway track into a multiuse trail. The characteristics of abandoned railways—flat, long, frequently running through historical areas—are appealing for various developments.

Rail-with-trail – A trail located adjacent to an active rail line.

Rail yard – A complex series of railroad tracks for storing, sorting, loading and unloading railroad cars.

Recreational Trails Program – A competitive grant program managed by state trail administrators; therefore, only projects that meet certain criteria may be funded. Its funds are drawn from the larger Transportation Alternatives Program.

Right-of-way – The land on which a railroad line, road or utility is built.

Roadway – The strip of land over which a road passes.

Shared land marking (sharrow) – Road marking used to indicate a shared land environment for bicycles and automobiles.

Shared-use path – A form of infrastructure that supports multiple recreation and transportation opportunities (a common synonym for “trail”).

Shoulder (road) – A strip of land adjacent to the traffic lane of a road, often used as an emergency stopping lane.

Surface Transportation Board (STB) – The federal agency that oversees changes made by railroad companies. Formerly the Interstate Commerce Commission.

Towpath – A road or trail on the bank of a river, canal or other inland waterway.

Trailbed – The roadbed of a trail.

Trail gap – Section of trail that still needs to be built to connect the existing trails.

Transportation Alternatives Program – A program administered by the Federal Highway Administration to authorize funding for programs and projects defined as “transportation alternatives,” including on- and off-road pedestrian and bicycle facilities. The Transportation Alternatives Program is the largest federal source for trail funding.

Waterway – A river, canal or other route for travel by water.



At Rails to Trails Conservancy, we are building a nation connected by trails. We reimagine public spaces to create safe ways for everyone to walk, bike and be active outdoors.