



Press Release

The Conservation Foundation

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New Open Space Plan Finds Missing Links, Helps with Flooding

An updated version of an open space vision for DuPage County was just released by The Conservation Foundation showing many new areas of potential land conservation connections along rivers and streams, according to the Foundation's President and CEO Brook McDonald.

"After driving around DuPage County a couple of weeks ago after the big flood, it was amazing how well our parks, forest preserves and other open spaces along our flooded rivers were storing billions of gallons of rain water," said McDonald. "These open spaces were doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing-- storing massive amounts of floodwater. Imagine how much worse it would have been if these floodplains and open areas were developed."

Natural Treasures of DuPage County: Open Space and Natural Areas Plan was a collaborative effort between The Conservation Foundation, DuPage County Forest Preserve District, several park districts and local municipalities, and open space and trail advocates in DuPage County. The plan identifies approximately 40,000 acres of existing protected or partially protected open space in DuPage County and an additional 6,000 acres of potential new open space land that, if protected, would complete the original vision of protecting 20 percent of the county. Many of the new acres are critical missing links in various greenways and trail corridors.

"One thing we know for sure in DuPage County and is that people love the trail systems," McDonald said. "This plan identifies those missing pieces of the open space puzzle and creates a shared vision for our future. All of the agencies that participated in the development of this plan are in the forever business, so this is a long term plan," he said.

The open space plan is conceptual and is not a zoning map, land use plan or any legally enforceable document. It is simply a shared vision of various open space agencies and is strictly voluntary for any landowners to participate. The year-long planning project was funded primarily with private funds from The DuPage Community Foundation and Grand Victoria Foundation.

Purpose of the Plan

The purpose of the open space plan was to help coordinate the efforts of all local and regional open space organizations in the acquisition or protection of property that will benefit and improve the quality of life for the residents of DuPage County.

- To identify and prioritize open land in DuPage County that will provide trail and greenway linkages, expand existing open space properties, buffer existing open space and protect forests, woodlands, prairies, wetlands, watersheds, streams and river corridors.
- Identify natural areas that will promote protection and preservation of endangered and threatened wildlife and plant species.
- Create a plan that various agencies in DuPage County can use to protect the identified remaining open space, and foster cooperation and partnerships in implementing the plan over time.

Why Now?

In the late 1970s, DuPage County was a national leader in land use planning. Our leaders realized suburbanization was quickly growing west into the county. They wanted to be prepared and make sure DuPage County remained a great place to live, conduct business and raise a family. To that end, vast amounts of interconnected open spaces were a key piece of that future land use vision. Many of these open spaces were to be greenways along our rivers and streams, creating linear parks and forest preserves for trails and outdoor recreation, and flood control.

Over the past several decades, as DuPage County grew and more people moved here, decision-makers did a good job of ensuring open space remained part of the county's landscape. But, it was not easy. The pressure to develop as much land as possible was strong. Thankfully, forest preserves, parks and other types of open space were set aside in accordance with this early vision.

“Today, many pieces of this original vision or “puzzle” remain missing,” said McDonald. “Key linkages for trails, open space greenways and river corridors have not been connected or protected. This open space master plan gets us to that original vision of an interconnected system of parks, forest preserves and trails to enhance the quality of life in DuPage County. This plan completes the vision.”

Benefits of Open Space

The largest open space landholder in the county is the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County at approximately 26,000 acres or 12 percent of the land in DuPage County. “We are also privileged to have extensive public parks and private acres, such as the Morton Arboretum, Cantigny, and numerous golf courses that provide open space,” said McDonald. “We can see the benefits from open space on a daily basis as we drive by the parks and preserves. Even if we do not have an opportunity to go to one of these sites, we get visual relief from the asphalt, concrete and manmade structures that surround us,” he said.

The benefits of open space are:

- **Environmental Benefits**
 - Provides habitats, migratory corridors, and water and food sources for wildlife and threatened and endangered species.
 - Protects forests, prairies, savannahs, wetlands and various plant communities.
 - Provides natural flood control and improves the quality and quantity of surface and underground runoff.
 - With the preservation of trees, there is a reduction in air pollution since plants absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen.
 - Provides areas where rainwater can infiltrate into the soil and recharge our groundwater aquifers.

- **Recreational Opportunities**
 - Provides access for active recreation, education, and research.
 - Trail linkages and greenways allow people to walk, run, bike or horseback ride to various locations, improving health and reducing automobile dependence.
 - Rivers, streams, lakes and ponds allow boating, canoeing, and fishing.
 - Protects historical, cultural and archaeological significant sites.

- **Health Benefits**
 - By providing more outdoor recreational opportunities people can improve their physical and mental health.
 - The Active Living Research organization reported that with “every \$1 spent on trails, there was almost \$3 in savings in direct medical costs.”

- **Economic Benefits**
 - Properties surrounding open space increase in value and provide an economic benefit to the community.
 - Communities receive increased tax revenues because of the increased property values of homes and businesses surrounding the open space areas.
 - Increased business revenue from the sale or rental of recreational equipment to residents and tourists.

- **Growth Management/Sprawl**
 - Planned open space provides communities a way to manage and channel future growth into appropriate areas, helping to avoid flooding and traffic congestion.
 - Open space provides a balance with other land uses that improves our quality of life and attracts new business and residents.

What is Open Space?

In a county setting, protected public open space is typically in the form of a Forest Preserve. In a municipal setting, it is typically a park. This Plan includes both types. An inclusive definition of open space is: Lands in an open or natural state, recreational lands, or areas already permanently protected. Examples of areas that fall within this definition are prairies, nature preserves, floodplains, wetlands, forests, parks, and greenways. Open space can be passive or active. Passive areas may include floodplains, wetlands, greenways and other natural

areas that offer protection to the region's flora and fauna. Active open space may include recreation areas such as ball fields, parks, playgrounds, trails, community recreational buildings, golf courses and equestrian facilities.

In the development of this plan, not only were important natural open space areas, trail connections and river corridors identified, but also sites that would not typically be viewed as park sites. "We looked at sites that have the potential to be restored and provide a benefit to the community and its citizens," said Jan Roehll, project manager. "In article after article, there is evidence of the benefits of getting outside and playing in a natural setting. We hope that some of these sites will provide the opportunity to simply play and interact outside, close to home," she said.

How the Map was Created

DuPage County's Information Technology Department has advanced Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping capabilities and the committee was able to utilize their information in the development of this plan. The GIS data provided by the County and by the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County identified existing parks, preserves, conservation easements, public property and large, private open space areas. The existing open space information was expanded upon with the proposed open space area that the Steering Committee identified. This generalized information shows the network of greenways and waterways that would interconnect the parks and preserves. The new potential open space, referred to as "Open Space Opportunities," are broad, very general areas where some land of interest was identified.

A copy of the plan can be found on The Conservation Foundation's web site at www.theconservationfoundation.org. Inquiries can be made to Jan Roehll, project manager and DuPage County Program Director at (630) 428-4500, ext. 21.

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Established in 1972, The Conservation Foundation is a private, not-for-profit land and watershed protection organization, located in Naperville on a 60-acre working, organic farm. The mission of The Conservation Foundation is: ***to preserve and restore natural areas and open space, protect rivers and watersheds, and promote environmental stewardship.*** The Foundation maintains a membership exceeding 3,500 members and 500 volunteers in DuPage, Kane, Kendall and Will Counties, Illinois.