Green Infrastructure Vision

Our region has many kinds of infrastructure, including roads, sewers, telecommunications, power grids and water supply. These are fundamental in determining our quality of life.

Equally important is another kind of infrastructure: green infrastructure. Green infrastructure consists of the network of natural areas—our rivers, lakes, prairies, woodlands and wetlands—that sustain people, plants and animals alike. It also includes street trees, backyards, and the landscaping on university campuses and corporate lands. Properly maintained, our green infrastructure provides numerous benefits, including:

- Clean air and water,
- Flood control,
- Opportunities for outdoor recreation and respite,
- Critical habitat for wildlife,
- Mitigated effects of climate change,
- Increased property values, and
- Attractive communities for people to live and work.

For these reasons, national polls consistently reveal that people strongly support conserving nature. They desire the many benefits that nature affords for themselves, their children, and for future generations.

In our region, people more than say they support conserving nature. They show their support with their pocketbooks. Since 1993, voters in northeastern Illinois have overwhelmingly approved 31 referenda, totaling $1.3 billion, to preserve and restore about 38,000 acres of open space, much of it critical natural habitat.

Completed in 2004, the Chicago Wilderness Green Infrastructure Vision is a map that reveals the region’s nearly 370,000 acres of protected natural areas. It is also a roadmap that identifies an additional 1.8 million acres to be preserved in 140 resource protection areas; acres that would expand and connect existing green spaces in a way that complements the planned growth of our region’s communities. Fully realized, the Green Infrastructure Vision would ensure that ours is a region where nature is accessible to everyone and improves the quality of life for all.

In some instances, the best option for achieving the goals of the Green Infrastructure Vision would be for units of government or nonprofit organizations to acquire and restore additional open space. In other cases, it might make more sense for private landowners to place conservation easements on their natural area acreage. Conservation easements are legally-binding agreements that allow land to remain in private ownership while permanently protecting the land’s natural features. Easements may also afford landowners certain tax benefits.

Another way to realize the Green Infrastructure Vision is through conservation development. By 2030, the population of northeastern Illinois, alone, is projected to exceed 10 million—an increase of two million beyond the 2000 census figures. To accommodate this growth, many communities will need to grow. Conservation development is a proven, cost-effective way to accommodate urban expansion and promote economic vitality while protecting critical open space, natural features and the many plants and animals that depend upon them for their very existence.

Achieving the Green Infrastructure Vision will take some time. But already planning agencies and communities are incorporating conservation development and natural resource preservation principles into regional land use plans and local ordinances. Corporations, universities and schools are greening their campuses with native landscaping. And a growing number of individuals are incorporating nature into their backyards through such simple steps as planting rain gardens or using rain barrels.
There are more than seven million acres within the Chicago Wilderness region. The Green Infrastructure Vision identifies 1.8 million as “resource protection areas.” In developing the plan, an emphasis was placed on creating large preserves, particularly those that include a mosaic of different habitat types, and on protecting land that connects or expands existing natural areas.