

Leading You Outdoors for Another 62 Years

Polk County Conservation Board was created by voters in 1956 to provide quality outdoor recreation, conservation education and the long-term protection of Polk County's natural heritage. Iowans knew then the critical importance of protecting scarce natural areas for future generations. Fifty-six years later, on Nov. 6, 2012, the citizens spoke again when they overwhelmingly passed the Polk County Water and Land Legacy bond referendum designed to support \$50 million in land, water, habitat, park and trail projects in Polk County. Read on to see just a sample of how this bond funding has improved outdoor recreation, education and conservation for many generations to come.



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Outdoor Experiences for all Audiences

Traditional camping, whether it be in a tent or an RV, isn't always desirable or practical for all audiences. However, the desire to experience an overnight stay in a park setting is still there. Four modern cabins were constructed at Jester Park in 2014 and four more will open at Yellow Banks Park in fall 2018. Affordable accommodations are available year-round with the comforts of home close at hand. These reservable cabins make the camping experience possible for all interests and abilities. Since opening, nearly 16,000 people have enjoyed a cabin stay and they have been occupied every weekend.



Four modern cabins provide year-round overnight accommodations at Jester Park, located on the west side of Saylorville Lake near Granger.



Situated on the south side of Des Moines, Fort Des Moines Park immerses visitors in an outdoor classroom—even over the pond for a unique view.

The Power of Partnerships

Once a vibrant and active cavalry post in the early 1900s, Fort Des Moines Park on the south side had grown tired and lackluster. Breathing life back into the park was done collectively between the county, state, school district and the local neighborhood association. Dreams of a healthy pond with great public access, a connective trail system, new park shelters and an innovative outdoor classroom became reality in 2017 thanks to a network of dedicated partners. Park attendance increased 114 percent following the improvements.



Swiftness Results in Success

Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt in northeastern Polk County has become one of the largest natural areas in the state. It is home to dozens of rare plants and animals and is known for its high quality restoration of grasslands and wetlands. Conservation staff became aware of the sale of a small 27-acre piece of land within the larger footprint of Chichaqua that was intended to be a beef feedlot. Of concern was a stream that bisected the sandy erodible

land and supplied water to a major wetland complex downstream. The potential for serious water quality and wildlife habitat impacts existed. Water and Land Legacy bond monies allowed staff to move quickly and decisively to acquire the land, recommend more suitable locations for a feedlot and protect the public investment at this signature park—a win-win for conservation and animal agriculture.



Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt, found in eastern Polk County, consists of 10 square miles of beautiful prairie, woodlands and wetlands along the Skunk River.



Special events, such as the Pedaler's Jamboree Iowa, now use the Chichaqua Valley Trail to bring thousands of visitors to the various trail communities between Baxter and Berwick.

PHOTO BY NOTLEY HAWKINS

Connecting Communities

A trip along the scenic Chichaqua Valley Trail (CVT) is as rich in history and potential as it is in natural beauty. Nowhere else in Iowa do trail users have access to such extensive natural areas, as the CVT crosses through open farmland, rolling meadows, forested river valleys and along Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt. Following a critical trail extension in 2015, the CVT traverses 26 miles stretching from Berwick to Baxter. This recreational route was built on the converted bed of an abandoned railway corridor

in 1987, and now serves as a significant connection to several surrounding trails and communities just as the railroad did so many years ago. The extension has sparked numerous businesses associated with trail users, as well as the formation of a friends group that has financed trail amenities such as benches, signage and bike fix-it stations. Readily available funds provided by this bond has in turn granted the public with tangible, functional results such as trail-to-community connections like the CVT.



Easter Lake is the centerpiece of this beautiful 464-acre park on the south side of Des Moines. Once renovations are complete, this park will attract more than 1 million visitors annually.

Leveraging Dollars Accomplishes Big Results

Many years of planning and partnerships will result in significant improvements to Easter Lake Park by the end of 2018. The area is undergoing a \$25 million renovation that includes a 10-kilometer trail around the lake and substantial water quality improvements to the 178-acre lake and 6,380-acre watershed. Since the lake's creation in 1967, it has lost nearly 30 percent of its volume as a result of siltation. Sediment washing in

from the watershed has filled the lake. Knowing that this one project alone could use one-half of allocated bond funding, staff was focused on working with project partners to incorporate multiple public and private funding sources. As a result, more than \$16 million was leveraged independent of the bond allowing for more money to be spent on other land, water, trail and park projects in the county.



Every Drop of Water Matters

Water quality management was a critical component of the bond referendum. Nearly 28 percent of the funding was earmarked for land and water enhancements. To date, improvements have been made to ponds and lakes in five Polk County parks, as well as creek, wetland and greenbelt enhancements in dozens of areas. The Polk County Conservation Board is a leader in water management authority planning and implementation. Bond funding has allowed the board to start a water monitoring program to assess the water quality of watersheds in Polk County. Currently, 64 sites are monitored bi-weekly at creeks, streams and drainage ditches by trained staff to conduct basic chemical, physical and biological measurements of water. Gathering data allows staff to detect changes in water quality and better assess the health of the watersheds. We can then share this information with watershed and governmental partners to aid in future efforts.



Polk County Conservation Board Naturalists Heidi Anderson and Joe Boyles collect water samples in one of the 64 sites that is part of the water quality monitoring program.



Jester Park Nature Center—Your Gateway to the Outdoors!

Quality of life opportunities and experiences are so plentiful in parks, trails and wild areas. Businesses benefit from having quality parks, trails and outdoor recreation available for their employees. Potential employees and entrepreneurs make job choices based on outdoor opportunities. Developing facilities that launch people outdoors to achieve long-term environmental health for our region aligns with missions and goals of the

Metropolitan Planning Organization, The Tomorrow Plan and Capital Crossroads. One such facility that is opening on Aug. 5 is the Jester Park Nature Center. This center will be a significant tourist attraction and environmental education hub, portal to Polk County's family of parks and Jester Park's new front porch. Tremendous private support, coupled with public and bond funding, has made this dream a reality for our current and future generations.

