



July 18, 2012

Ms. Angela Connolly, Chair
Polk County Board of Supervisors
111 Court Avenue
Des Moines, IA 50309

Dear Ms. Connolly,

The Polk County Conservation Board voted at its July meeting to request that the Board of Supervisors place a bonding referendum on the November 2012 ballot in the amount of \$50 million for the purposes of funding park and trail improvements, land acquisition and conservation measures including lakes, rivers and stream improvements within Polk County. The use of these funds will be guided by existing master plans and capital improvement plans. Expenditures will be open to the public and audited to assure that funds are utilized wisely and public benefits are maximized. As with the current funds made available to the Conservation Board, these funds will be leveraged with other partners or through grants whenever possible.

The Trust for Public Lands (TPL) recently completed a feasibility study that considered the options that Polk County would have for providing funding for the Conservation Board for park and trails improvements, and conservation measures including land acquisition, lake and stream improvements and easements. The study was funded by the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and the Great Outdoors Fund. A copy of the study is attached.

The study considered a range of options including local sales taxes, increased property tax levies and bonding. The recommendation from the study was that the most suitable option would be issuing general obligation bonds based on the County's financial rating and overall bonding capacity. Their recommendation also included that the bonding referendum be placed on the ballot as part of a presidential election. Similar bonding referendums for these purposes have been most successful nationwide when included as part of a presidential election. The study considered bonding levels ranging from \$30 million to \$100 million over a 20 year period. The suggested level was to bond for \$50 million which would cost the average household in Polk County approximately \$10 per year.

As a follow up to the Study, the TPL contracted with American Viewpoint¹ to conduct an independent poll of Polk County voters to determine the level of support for the proposed bonding referendum. The poll indicated that 67% of the public in Polk County would support the proposed \$50 million bonding referendum given that they were aware of how the funds would be used. The bonding referendum would require greater than a 60% support to pass.

¹ American Viewpoint is one of the most widely respected public opinion research and strategic message consulting firms in the United States. Founded in 1985 by Linda DiVall, the company has established a national reputation for outstanding quantitative and qualitative research in politics, corporate affairs, public policy and government relations.

Polk County Conservation has identified over \$20 million of park and trail improvements within its capital improvement plan. Most of these improvements are a result of recent park master plans. The trail projects are all ongoing trail connections that the Conservation Board has been actively working towards completion. Staff has also identified approximately \$10 million in current high priority property acquisitions that involve sensitive areas that are being threatened or natural areas that should be preserved or protected for the future. As current planning processes such as the Tomorrow Plan, Capital Crossroads, Four Mile Creek and Easter Lake Watershed Study Projects and the Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Master Plan unfold, it is anticipated that numerous other conservation improvements and land acquisition needs will be identified.

Polk County Conservation currently has very limited capacity to undertake the projects or acquisition needs identified above. With future federal and state grant opportunities likely to decline, the challenges to fund these projects will be severely limited. These challenges will make it very difficult to respond to the anticipated future population growth in Polk County and the subsequent demand for parks, trails and natural areas.

We believe that the successful bonding referendum as proposed will position the County to respond to the existing and future needs for Polk County parks and trails, and provide for the protection of sensitive natural areas, lakes, rivers and streams. Additionally, Polk County will be able to support other communities and local agencies in continuing to partner with them to enhance and protect the natural environment within the County.

By supporting this proposed bonding referendum, we believe that Polk County has the opportunity to take a lead role within the greater Des Moines area in providing quality outdoor recreation opportunities and areas as well as protecting the remaining natural areas that exist within Polk County.

Sincerely;

Tom Levis, Chair
Polk County Conservation Board

Jim Cataldo, Vice Chair
Polk County Conservation Board

Sara Kurovski
Polk County Conservation Board

Michelle Mc Enany
Polk County Conservation Board

Mike Smith
Polk County Conservation Board