



# Strategic Plan

JANUARY 2014



*Leading You  
Outdoors!*

The Polk County Conservation Board's mission is to provide the citizens of Polk County with quality outdoor recreation, conservation education, and the long-term protection of Polk County's natural heritage.

[www.leadingyououtdoors.org](http://www.leadingyououtdoors.org)



# Proud to Announce



January 14, 2014

Dear Polk County Citizens and Conservation Supporters:

Polk County Conservation Board proudly presents this 5-Year Strategic Plan that reflects the input of Board members, staff, public, and regional planning efforts. This plan is intended to be flexible, recognizing that adjustments will need to be made in the event that new opportunities or issues need to be addressed or unforeseen events occur that impact our best laid plans.

Measurable outcomes will be identified for each strategic priority. These outcomes are intended to be aggressive while at the same time realistic. One of our primary responsibilities will be to ensure that steady progress is made to accomplish these strategic priorities. This will be very much a team effort.

The seven initiatives identified within the plan are environmental education, water quality, public awareness, natural areas, outdoor recreation, watershed management, and trails. These focus areas, and accompanying action steps, will be a high priority for Polk County Conservation throughout the duration of this plan.

Strategic planning is critical in meeting the needs of Polk County, its citizens, and our parks, trails, and natural areas for generations to come. Questions and comments about this plan can be directed to Richard Leopold, Deputy Director, at [rich.leopold@polkcountyiowa.gov](mailto:rich.leopold@polkcountyiowa.gov) or 515-323-5322.

Sincerely,

Jim Cataldo,  
*Chair, Polk County Conservation Board*

Richard Leopold,  
*Deputy Director, Polk County Conservation Board*



# Initiative Summary

On December 5 and 6, 2013, the Polk County Conservation Board held a strategic planning retreat. At this event, there was focus on strategic planning initiatives. These initiatives were the result of a series of meetings and interviews with Polk County Board of Supervisors, Polk County Conservation Board members, the Great Outdoors Foundation, the Polk County Conservation Advisory Committee, Polk County Conservation managers and staff, and in cooperation with regional plans such as Capital Crossroads and The Tomorrow Plan.

The seven initiatives were ranked in order of importance for the scope of this 5-year strategic plan for the Polk County Conservation Board. It should be noted that PCCB will continue with programs of existing excellence, and this prioritization has largely to do with future need and expansion.

- Environmental Education
- Water Quality
- Public Awareness
- Natural Areas
- Outdoor Recreation
- Watershed Management Authorities
- Trails



## Top Ten Elements

The following are the **Top Ten Elements** across all seven initiatives based on strong common support shown by the Board.

- 1) Inventory and monitor water quality within areas managed by Polk County Conservation to track changes in water quality, and identify areas of concern or priorities while recognizing the challenges associated with impacting upstream behaviors/practices.
- 2) Educate and inform local leaders on natural resource issues to promote sustainable and respectful environmental practices and policies.
- 3) Develop a process to identify and prioritize natural resource areas for acquisitions.
- 4) Emphasize passive recreation activities that promote improved public health in natural environments.
- 5) Communicate clearly and regularly to all interested parties on the initiatives funded within the Polk County Water and Land Legacy bond.
- 6) Promote a diversity of trails including soft surface nature trails, interpretive trails, cross-country ski trails, water trails, and multi-use paved trails providing opportunities for a variety of recreation activities and users.
- 7) Demonstrate best practices and commitment to improved water quality through the implementation of Polk County Conservation Board projects and programs.
- 8) Provide direct support to the watershed planning and design efforts of the Four Mile Creek Watershed Management Authority including developing a vision and long range plan for the Four Mile Creek Greenbelt. This will include protecting and restoring the natural resources and hydrologic functions within the watershed.
- 9) Develop a regional program of environmental education volunteers and interns in partnership with local organizations, communities and school districts to provide additional reach and resources for the Polk County environmental education program.
- 10/11) Support a regional approach to establish and coordinate watershed management authorities throughout the County with emphasis on rural watersheds recognizing that the watershed often comprises multiple units of local government.
- 10/11) Increase public understanding and awareness of the benefits of watershed management through educational and interpretive programs and materials.

Polk County Conservation Board will be using these guidelines in creating a number of management plans within the PCCB system, including but not limited to staffing, operations, land-use management, recreation, environmental education, and facility / infrastructure planning.

## Environmental Education

**GOAL:** Polk County Conservation Board will be a leader to provide and expand quality environmental education for all ages.



- Educate and inform local leaders on natural resource issues to promote sustainable and respectful environmental practices and policies.
- Develop a regional program of environmental education volunteers and interns in partnership with local organizations, communities and school districts to provide additional reach and resources for the Polk County environmental education program.
- Support the national and state models of the STEM initiative (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and continue to meet the National Science standards.
- Emphasize the use of technology and passive education methods in expanding environmental education opportunities.
- Support the development of a geographically dispersed network of facilities to support providing enhanced environmental education programming across the County.
- Continue to support the development of a regional coordinated approach to expanding environmental education.
- Develop new programs or incorporate into existing programs the concepts and benefits of sustainable living and public health.
- Identify and promote standard educational themes consistent across providers with the messages tailored to local resources and participants



PCC annually presents approximately 1,445 public programs that reach more than 32,000 people.

## Water Quality

**GOAL:** Polk County Conservation Board will be a leader in managing for and advocating on behalf of improving water quality within Polk County and the State of Iowa.



- Inventory and monitor water quality within areas managed by Polk County Conservation to track changes in water quality, and identify areas of concern or priorities while recognizing the challenges associated with impacting upstream behaviors/practices.
- Demonstrate best practices and commitment to improved water quality through the implementation of Polk County Conservation Board projects and programs.
- Promote environmental education programs that inform the public on how they can become involved in water quality issues and make a difference locally.
- Protect and restore priority greenways or riparian buffer areas through acquisitions or easements.
- Accurately and clearly inform the public of local and statewide issues regarding water quality and its impact on natural resources, wildlife, recreation and public health.
- Assist other communities and private entities through technical assistance and guidance.



PCC maintains 38+ miles of streambank and 710+ acres of lakes, ponds, marshes, and river access in Polk County.

### KEY TO SUCCESS

For each initiative, icons are used to express degree of magnitude required to successfully accomplish the initiative (over baseline.) These initiatives are in order of priority as well as bullets within each initiative are in priority order.

 **COST**

 **TIME TO COMPLETE**

 **PERSONNEL**  
(existing employees, new employees, contract labor, etc.)

 **DIFFICULTY TO IMPLEMENT**

## Public Awareness

**GOAL:** Polk County Conservation Board will increase public visibility and awareness of programming, the comprehensive park system, and current and future initiatives.



- Communicate clearly and regularly to all interested parties on the initiatives funded within the Polk County Water and Land Legacy bond.
- Use social media and technology to improve the publicizing of programs and facilities being offered.
- Promote increased recognition of Polk County Conservation through improved marketing techniques including branding/icons/themes.
- Coordinate efforts with partners, volunteers and other agencies and communities.
- Expand and enhance the “Family of Parks” program in connection with the “Leading You Outdoors” theme.



Volunteers contribute 12,500+ hours annually to PCC. More than 23,000 people receive regular communications via newsletters, emails, Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, Pinterest, and YouTube.

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- COST**
- TIME TO COMPLETE**
- PERSONNEL**  
*(existing employees, new employees, contract labor, etc.)*
- DIFFICULTY TO IMPLEMENT**

## Natural Areas

**GOAL:** Polk County Conservation Board will actively work to preserve, maintain, and restore natural areas within Polk County.



- Develop a process to identify and prioritize natural resource areas for acquisitions.
- Develop criteria-based approach to evaluating inventoried natural areas and prioritizing for protection or restoration needs.
- Develop natural resource management or restoration plans for existing county natural areas and for those areas planned for acquisition.
- Inventory existing natural areas within the County.
- Educate private landowners and local communities on current natural areas management techniques including management of invasive species, use of prescribed burning, and mechanical brush removal.



PCC offers 13,000+ acres of park land which consists of 3,300+ acres of woodland, 2,000+ acres of wetland, 4,700+ acres of prairie, and 250+ acres of manicured green space.

## Outdoor Recreation

**GOAL:** Polk County Conservation Board will actively work to provide and expand quality outdoor recreation opportunities.



- Emphasize passive recreation activities that promote improved public health in natural environments.
- Establish methodology to track park use and trends including the amount of use, types of users, user expenditures and user satisfaction to evaluate the benefits of programs and facilities being provided.
- Ensure clean safe facilities through ongoing maintenance, inspection and replacement.

- Continue to evaluate the quality of programs and facilities through the use of local public surveys, public meetings, advisory groups and neighborhood park friends groups.
- Maintain updated master plans for all parks and areas.
- Partner in development and management of 1 or 2 regional greenbelts.
- Support the addition of two regional parks in response to projected regional growth and areas projected to be underserved for access to parks and natural areas.



PCC manages 20 parks and trails, which includes 350+ campsites, 20 park shelters, 9 playgrounds, 7 major trails, a golf course, and an equestrian center.

- Work with agencies and communities in identifying grants and funding sources for the implementation of projects identified in watershed improvement plans.



PCC is an active partner within many sensitive watersheds in Polk County such as Four Mile Creek, Easter Lake, Camp Creek, Beaver Creek, Des Moines River, and Raccoon River.

## Trails

**GOAL:** Polk County Conservation Board will be a major supporter in the development and maintenance of trails with an emphasis on connecting communities.



- Promote a diversity of trails including soft surface nature trails, interpretive trails, cross-country ski trails, water trails, and multi-use paved trails providing opportunities for a variety of recreation activities and users.
- Support a regional approach to planning, promoting and advocating for the development and maintenance of the Central Iowa Trails Network.
- Work with local organizations and agencies to develop alternative methods for funding trail maintenance and improvements.
- Work as a major supporter within the Central Iowa Trails Network to actively support partnerships with the communities involved.
- Set the standard for safe and efficient operations and maintenance of trails including defining minimum maintenance standards.



PCC currently manages and maintains more than 35 miles of paved trails and 37 miles of natural surface trails.

## Watershed Management

**GOAL:** Polk County Conservation Board will provide support in the development, planning, and project implementation of Watershed Management Authorities.



- Provide direct support to the watershed planning and design efforts of the Four Mile Creek Watershed Management Authority including developing a vision and long range plan for the Four Mile Creek Greenbelt. This will include protecting and restoring the natural resources and hydrologic functions within the watershed.
- Support a regional approach to establish and coordinate watershed management authorities throughout the County with emphasis on rural watersheds recognizing that the watershed often comprises multiple units of local government.
- Increase public understanding and awareness of the benefits of watershed management through educational and interpretive programs and materials.
- Provide technical advice to established watershed management authorities in developing watershed improvement plans and identifying priority projects.