

American Discovery Trail

Linking Eastern Iowa

The American Discovery Trail (ADT) is the nation's first coast-to-coast, non-motorized trail. It is a new breed of national trail - part city, part small town, part forest, part mountains, part desert - all in one trail. In 6,800 miles of adventure, discovery and fun, it stretches from Delaware to California. It reaches across America, linking community to community and providing trail users the opportunity to journey into the heart of all that is uniquely American - its culture, heritage, landscape, and spirit.

The ADT is all about connections – people to people, community to community, urban areas to wilderness. It provides the opportunity for the most adventurous to travel from coast to coast, truly discovering the heart of America. More importantly, it provides millions access to a trail system that improves quality of life and protects our natural resources. The ADT connects five National Scenic, 12 National Historic, and 34 National Recreational Trails; passes through urban centers like Cincinnati and San Francisco; leads to 14 National Parks and 16 National Forests; and visits 10,000 sites of historic, cultural, and natural significance. It is truly the backbone of the National Trails System.

The American Discovery Trail's western terminus is at the Pacific Ocean at Point Reyes National Seashore in California. From there, it traverses California, Nevada, Utah and Colorado, where in Denver it splits into two routes. The Northern Midwest route travels through Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois and Indiana. The Southern Midwest route explores Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Indiana. After rejoining just west of Cincinnati, the route continues through Kentucky, Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland, Washington, DC, and Delaware, where the eastern terminus is at the Atlantic Ocean at Cape Henlopen State Park.

In Iowa, the American Discovery Trail traces part of its route through eastern Iowa. Connecting this important trail network is a vital part of the trail infrastructure in Iowa. Additionally, eastern Iowa is the fastest growing region of the state serving more than one third of Iowa's population.

Johnson County

Connecting the 5-mile "Missing Link" of the Hoover Trail from Ely to Solon has been discussed for about 20 years. It has long been considering the critical link in connecting more than 200 miles of trails in eastern Iowa. This "missing link" will connect 4 of Iowa's largest communities and at least 10 urban trails in Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Cedar Falls and Waterloo. The counties directly impacted include Johnson, Linn, Benton and Black Hawk, with a combined population of more than 500,000 people.

In Johnson County, completion of the “missing link” will connect the communities of Solon, North Liberty, Coralville and Iowa City, with the communities of Cedar Rapids and Cedar Falls/Waterloo. In addition, the trail will connect to more than 80 miles of trail within Johnson County, the Old Capitol in Iowa City, the University of Iowa, Coralville Lake and Lake McBride State Park. Completion of the trail from Iowa City to West Branch (not included in this funding request) will connect all of these trails to the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site and Presidential Library, the home of Iowa’s only President. The Herbert Hoover Historic Site is managed by the National Park Service.

Johnson County is one of Iowa’s fastest growing counties. For three decades the county has experienced robust growth and is growing in population about 4%-5% every two years. At least four new schools are scheduled for construction in 2014. The demand for trails and green space is unprecedented in the county as urban sprawl consumes green space and agricultural land. Vern Fish, Director of the Black Hawk County Conservation Board recently stated that “I get almost as many calls from people living in Johnson County as I do my own county asking about the availability of trails”. Nearly every community in Johnson County has invested in a trail network and now it is time we connect all of these trails through this portion of the American Discovery Trail – Connecting Eastern Iowa. In addition, this proposal is consistent with the Governor’s recently adopted initiative to make Iowa the healthiest State in the nation.

Black Hawk County

The Black Hawk County Conservation Board manages the northern 26 miles of the Cedar Valley Nature Trail from Evansdale down to Buchanan/Benton County line. This stretch of trail goes through Brandon in Buchanan County. This 26 mile segment links local trails in Cedar Falls, Waterloo, Hudson, Evansdale, Gilbertville, La Porte City and Brandon to Cedar Rapids.

The Economic Value of Iowa’s Natural Resources, a study done by the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development at Iowa State University in 2006, estimated that 79,720 people per year use the Cedar Valley Nature Trail while spending \$637,757. This study was commissioned by the Sustainable Funding for Natural Resources Study Committee of the Iowa General Assembly. Thus, the Cedar Valley Nature Trail has had a very positive impact on the quality of life and economic development in the Cedar Valley.

The Flood of 2008 caused over \$6,000,000 worth of damage to the Cedar Valley Nature Trail in Black Hawk and Buchanan County by washing out two bridges over the Cedar River and tearing up miles of the trail surface. Since 2008 the Black Hawk County Conservation Board has secured the local, state and federal funding necessary to repair this damage. On May 4, 2013 the McFarlane Bridge over the Cedar River was dedicated and it was again possible to ride or hike from Cedar Falls to Cedar Rapids.

The northern 15 miles of the Cedar Valley Nature Trail from Evansdale to La Porte City is paved. The next 25.4 miles down to Schultz Road in Linn County is a granular trail surface. The last 16.36 miles is paved down to Cedar Rapids. The Black Hawk County Conservation Board manages 9 miles of this granular gap. It has been estimated that it will cost \$350,000 per

mile or up to \$3,000,000 to engineer and pave our share of “*the gap*”. Black Hawk County has struggled to find funding for this project. Four separate grants to fund the cost laying new gravel on 4.4 miles of trail in Buchanan County have failed. Laying this sub-base is the necessary first step to paving.

Trail users prefer a paved surface over a granular trail. Road bikes with thin tires do not work well on gravel and a granular surface is harder to maintain. The 25.4 mile “*granular gap*” reduces the number of people who will ride from Waterloo to Cedar Rapids. ***The Cedar Valley Nature Trail will not reach its full recreational and economic potential until the Gap is paved.***

Linn County

Linn County has been a pioneer in the rails-to-trails effort with the Cedar Valley Nature Trail in the early 1980s. This trail has since served as the backbone of a rapidly-developing system of trails in Eastern Iowa. The Cedar Valley Nature Trail extends from southern Linn County north through Cedar Rapids through Benton and Buchanan Counties to Waterloo in Black Hawk County. The final connection in Linn County from Ely south to the Johnson County line will complete the connection from the Johnson County line in the south with a planned connection to the Johnson County trail system to the south connecting Iowa City and Coralville to the trail system.

This critically important backbone connects to trails in the Cedar Rapids, Marion and Hiawatha making a vibrant trail system accessible to residents. In addition, trail usage has shown a steady increase as more trails connect to this backbone. As the trail system continues to develop, trails will continue to serve as tourist destinations as people visit these Eastern Iowa communities to enjoy the trail system as well as the many other quality-of-life amenities in our communities.

Trails also provide a significant health and wellness opportunity for residents. By providing connections from where people live to where they want to go, trails offer an enjoyable option for people to gain health benefits while using and enjoying the trail system. The Governor, Iowa Legislature and Wellmark’s Bluezone initiative have all supported making Iowa a healthier place to live. Trails play an important role in this effort.

The following excerpt is taken from a study commissioned by this legislature in 2006:

The Economic Value of Iowa’s Natural Resources
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Commissioned by the Sustainable Funding for
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The Economic Value of Iowa’s Natural Resources

Executive Summary

In a time of changing demographics, an increasing demand for renewable energy sources and a growing concern for the environment, policy makers in Iowa are faced with the challenge of identifying strategies for economic development that balances the needs of the changing population with economic and resource sustainability.

Agriculture is a major driving force of Iowa's rural economy with nearly 75 percent of its surface area devoted to crop production and nearly 90 percent of land area as privately-owned farmland. Even so, the demand for corn-based ethanol is driving agricultural commodity prices higher, creating greater incentive to put more land into production. On the other hand, Iowa's small percentage of public lands is supporting a growing recreation industry, which has been spurred by the increasing numbers of urban residents in the state. Urban residents desire a certain quantity and quality of outdoor recreational opportunities, which on the surface seems to fly in the face of the goals of the agricultural industry and the state's economic growth. Because Iowans value quality natural resource-related amenities, recreation and the using of these natural resources contribute greatly to the state's overall economy and the well being of Iowans. The purpose of this study is to discuss how the social and environmental benefits of Iowa's natural resources generate significant economic values for Iowans and to demonstrate that measurable expenditure benefits that can be calculated to inform economic development policies at the local, regional, and state levels. The study examines how outdoor recreation activities generate spending that translates into jobs and payroll totals. In addition, we consider how improvements to quality of life generated by recreation opportunities and natural resources are important to retaining and attracting skilled workers in the state. Finally, we address how environmental improvements to Iowa's natural resources can also generate economic benefits.

The results of our study can be summarized as follows:

Outdoor recreation opportunities are important to Iowans. More than 25 million visits are made to Iowa state parks and lakes annually. County park visits are estimated to be at a comparable level of about 23 million visitor groups. Other recreation sites such as city parks, state forest and preserves and river-based activities were not examined in this study, but also contribute to the outdoor recreation package enjoyed by Iowans. These recreation sites provide opportunities for hunting, fishing, boating, swimming, wildlife viewing, hiking, riding, picnicking and just relaxing.

Recreation is a large industry in Iowa. The outdoor recreation activities and visits to parks and lakes generate considerable spending that translates into substantial job and payroll totals. For the four recreation amenities with usable data (lakes, state parks, county parks and trails) we estimate spending levels of \$2.63 billion and 50 million visits. Including secondary or multiplier effects implies that more than 27,400 jobs and \$580 million in income are being generated in the Iowa recreation industry.

Recreation amenities and activities in Iowa generate economic benefits beyond spending impacts. In addition to the local jobs and income generated by the process of recreation spending in Iowa, there exists a surplus, or net economic value to Iowans, which is the difference between what consumers are willing to pay for an amenity and what they actually pay. National studies have estimated the economic value individuals place on a day of different types of recreation, including camping, fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, hiking, swimming and general park activities. When these estimates are applied to the rates observed in Iowa, the economic value for the rates of participation in these outdoor recreation activities yielded aggregate economic values exceeding \$1.1 billion annually, beyond the spending impacts identified earlier.

Recreation opportunities and natural resources are important to retaining and attracting skilled workers in the state. Iowa, like many other Midwestern states, has had to deal with problems associated with the "brain drain" of highly educated and skilled individuals leaving rural areas, and often the state altogether. Quality of life factors are increasingly important considerations in

the competition for recruiting and retaining entrepreneurs and skilled workers. National and regional studies, which include Iowa, have consistently identified quality natural resources as an important factor in rates of economic growth. These findings hold true even for non-coastal and non-mountainous states.

New investments to improve the environment and add recreation opportunities generate economic benefits. Improving water quality through erosion and runoff controls can translate into enhanced recreation opportunities. The Iowa Lakes Valuation Project has identified recreational benefits related to water quality in lakes and watersheds and that are substantially greater than costs of restoration. Expanded parks and facilities also demonstrate sizable social benefits relative to costs.

Consider that these estimates are now almost seven years old and you can see the benefits a healthy and robust recreation infrastructure provide to the state. The counties represented here have already invested several million dollars of public and private funds to develop the trails to date. We are asking for a substantial state investment to help finish the connectivity and major improvements necessary to finish this trail system Without your help, this important piece of recreational infrastructure will take years to finish.