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Contact: Wendy Kummerer,
Communications Manager
815-338-6223

Conservation District approves Site Development and Public Access Plan

The McHenry County Conservation District has been applauded for preserving open space and protecting wildlife habitat. But at the same time, they have been scrutinized for not allowing public access to these properties. The Board of Trustees recently approved the Comprehensive Site Development and Public Access Plan which will address public concern as well as protect the county's most treasured resources.

This plan specifically identifies and prioritizes the top 42 projects that will receive funds and staff resources over the next 5 years. Twenty-four of these projects involve public access and trail improvements.

Some highlights from the top twenty projects includes the following improvements: a regional Trail from Harvard to Boone; public access and trails at Kishwaukee Headwaters, Woodstock; public access and trails at Lake in the Hills/Rothchild parcel, LITH; public access and trails at Bailey Wood's, Hebron; public access and trails at Highpoint, Alden Township; and public access and trails at Boone Creek, Bull Valley.

"While balancing needs was a critical part of the planning, the desire to make connections between citizens and Conservation District sites, as well as providing amenities geographically throughout the county were major factors that were incorporated when determining which projects with receive priority at this time," said Elizabeth Kessler, Executive Director.

The scope of the project involved an internal inventory and analysis of existing amenities per region, public workshops and a community needs assessment survey and a review of regional trail plans. Land preservation and restoration maintained a priority status throughout the process. However, a number of recreational needs, such as camping, hiking and general site improvements, surfaced as "most desirable" and thus served as the organizing framework for the list.

Other criteria that formed the list included those projects in progress, if a master plan was already completed, if grant funding had been secured, if a need for replacement existed and if the necessary resources were available.

“These improvements are not just strategies to create a more sustainable physical environment – they are opportunities to strengthen McHenry County’s economic, social and cultural environments as well. They were generated by and for the residents of the county and the residents will be the primary beneficiaries of this planning endeavor,” said Board President Bonnie Leahy. “It is with this spirit of collaboration that the Board of Trustees and staff can now advance the recommendations toward implementation.”

McHenry County Conservation District maintains over 21,500 acres of open space. Twenty-six sites are open to the public including four educational facilities, 80 miles of trails, seven camping sites, 16 fishing locations and 14 picnic shelters available to reserve.

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