

## *Executive Summary*

Sauk County has always been an outdoor recreational mecca. Nineteenth century promoters encouraged tourists to ride the train up from Chicago for a stay at rustic resorts on Devil's Lake and at the Dells of the Wisconsin River. Visitors were compelled to return by their recollection of the beautiful and often rugged landscapes and abundant waters, features unique in the Midwest to Sauk County.

It is almost as hard to separate recreational use and tourism from Sauk County's economy as it is to separate agriculture. In 2006 Sauk County ranked third in overall tourism spending among Wisconsin counties (behind Milwaukee and Dane County). Devil's Lake State Park is Wisconsin's most popular state park, hosting nearly three million visitors each year. Dell's tourism is legendary, making Lake Delton and Wisconsin Dells the "Waterpark Capital of the World". Recent and planned capacity improvements to Sauk County's federal and state highway system promise to make vacation trips from Madison, Milwaukee, Chicago and the Twin Cities a more convenient and less expensive travel choice than ever before. Rail transit is still available to Sauk County via the Amtrack service to Wisconsin Dells, a contemporary echo of the County's recreational history. As regional rail service improves, it will become a more popular mode for recreational travel.

Sauk County's tourist and recreation industry is the creation of visionary entrepreneurs and conservation activists, but its beating heart is the natural heritage so generously bestowed on us. The land, sparkling waters, clear air, and stunning views, the variety of seasonal conditions and recreational opportunities continually beckon outdoor enthusiasts from Wisconsin and across the Midwest. Sauk County is blessed to be the focus of such attention, but we risk loving our county to death by unwittingly damaging the fragile resources that are the basis of this economic good fortune. Our sensitive natural areas and choice outdoor recreational sites are vulnerable to ever increasing crowds of visitors and year-round intensive uses. Sauk County must find ways to relieve the pressure on these over-taxed favorites and prepare for even greater demand in the future. That task has been the charge of the twenty-three member Citizens Advisory Committee appointed by the Sauk County Transportation and Parks Committee in 2006 to oversee the creation of the *2008 Sauk County Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan*.

Sauk County began looking to its recreational prospects with the publication of the *2002 Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan*, which identified critical Parks and Recreation Department operational goals and objectives. This new *2008 CORP* takes a broader look at both the local and regional outdoor recreational environment, having the advantage of important information provided by the *2005-2010 Wisconsin State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan*. The *2008 CORP* offers a careful analysis of current County recreational resources and facilities, and surveys County residents' demand for outdoor recreational opportunities.

The *2008 CORP* focuses attention on three primary program goals. *Goal #1* seeks to both preserve and to expand on the high quality recreational resources and facilities that we have. *Goal #2* emphasizes improved stewardship of public land and facilities to ensure the health of the natural communities, and the adoption of sustainable management practices. *Goal #3* calls for better coordination of outdoor recreational opportunities through collaboration with the County's conservation partners and other recreational resource managers. The good news is that a broad variety of private recreational resources are accessible to the public in Sauk County. From golf courses to ski slopes, private recreational properties serve the public year round, and greatly

# 2008 Sauk County Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

## Final Draft

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compliment the public natural areas, land and water resources. Mutual public/ private collaboration will enhance the public awareness of each domain of recreational offerings, and Sauk County's general recreational appeal.

The *2008 CORP* also identifies specific goals for individual County-owned properties, whether operated under Parks and Recreation Department management or not. The Advisory Committee felt that all of these publicly owned properties offer some recreational potential, and deserve consideration as part of an integrated and fully functional Sauk County outdoor recreation program.

Sauk County is no longer simply a quiet rural backwater, but sits at the very edge of a growing Midwestern urban region, whose residents are aggressive in their search for new recreational activities, but who are also trying to manage limited travel budgets. Interesting regional destinations often stand out as attractive alternatives to major cross-country or international trips. Sauk County fits the bill for many families. As the *Wisconsin State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan* makes clear, Sauk County is uniquely positioned in the seven-county "Southern Gateway" region of Wisconsin, both in terms of its strategic location and in its array of recreational attractions, to serve a vast regional population.

While lodging and dining facilities for serving the recreational visitors are locally impressive, they not very well distributed around Sauk County. Hospitality services are lacking in the southern half of Sauk County, where visitors to Devil's Lake State Park, the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway and the Spring Green area who can't find a room in one of the few small motels or Bed & Breakfast establishments in nearby communities must hope for a scarce campsite during the busiest summer tourist months. State park campsites are typically reserved by out-of-county users months in advance, and Sauk County only provides camping facilities in one county park, White Mound County Park, which is located in the west-central area of the County, away from the areas of greatest demand. Private camping facilities are also available, but again, most are located north of the Baraboo Range.

Opportunities therefore exist for taking reasonable economic advantage of the natural resource amenities so abundant in Sauk County. As more visitors find Sauk County, places for them to stay, eat and shop will be increasingly important to our business and community development.

Public protection of the County's natural heritage is critical in terms of maintaining and expanding our existing inventory of public resources, and where appropriate, providing managed public access to scenic ecological assets and viable recreational sites. The same vision that saw the promise of the Wisconsin Dells and of Devil's Lake, and prompted action to protect these sites, is needed now to secure Sauk County's outdoor recreational future.

These issues and others confront Sauk County's leaders, elected officials and citizens, whose primary interests may lie in sectors of the County's economic and cultural life other than in outdoor recreation. But there is no doubt that our collective interest, energy and resources are needed to maintain Sauk County's current enviable position, and to fulfill its great promise as a Midwestern regional leader in outdoor recreation and tourism. In Sauk County, there is much to be gained, and much to lose.