LAKE AHQUABI STATE PARK RECREATION USE PLAN

In advance of the 100th anniversary of Iowa state parks in 2020, the Department of Natural Resources is developing plans for future recreation opportunities that are compatible with the resources of each state park.

LAKE AHQUABI STATE PARK - A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Iowa's first state park, Backbone, was dedicated by the Board of Conservation in 1920 and more quickly followed - special places chosen for acquisition before their truly significant natural and cultural features were irretrievably lost through forces such as agriculture, logging, and urbanization. Recreation facilities were generally few in the early parks. As the 1920's progressed, however, there was a growing demand for more active things to do in state parks; pursuits like camping, swimming, and boating.

The Great Depression of 1929 stalled state park efforts, but President Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC, and the Works Progress Administration, the WPA, brought thousands to work in a rapidly expanding park system building cabins, lodges, beaches, shelters, roads, dams and a myriad other structures.

In 1933, the Twenty-Five Year Conservation Plan was completed, providing a blueprint for Iowa resource and recreation action. The plan recommended a number of new state parks and preserves, as well as a series of artificial lakes in southern Iowa for angling and other outdoor recreation opportunities. – with the thought that some of these would eventually become state parks. Concerns were also raised about the threat of future siltation.

Several sites in Warren County were considered. The chosen one was recommended by noted conservationist and Twenty-Five Year Plan participant, J. N. (Ding) Darling. In 1934, an agreement was reached between the City of Indianola, the Warren County Board of Supervisors, the Board of Conservation, the Fish and Game Commission and the director of Emergency Conservation Work (including the CCC and WPA) in Iowa. Indianola would purchase 561 acres and deed it to the state. In exchange, the city was granted the right to tap the lake for municipal water in emergency situations. The state would purchase an additional 209 acres. The park now encompasses 770 acres in addition to the Hooper Wildlife Management Area to the south.

CCC Company 769 worked from March, 1934 to October, 1937 to literally construct a new state park, complete with facilities including: the earthen dam forming the 125 acre lake, lodge, beach concession and changing building, stone shelter, restrooms, maintenance building and staff residence, group camp complex with nine cabins, sewer system, footbridge, steps, trails, and roads.

As with all CCC projects, most building materials were secured from the nearby area. Since the preferred limestone was not conveniently available for the Lake Ahquabi work, sandstone was utilized there. This choice of material had a future bearing on park renovation work at Ahquabi.

In 1935, a contest was held to name the new park. The winning entry from Mary Louise Brownrigg Hanrahan was "Ahquabi," a Meskwakie word meaning "resting place." The park was officially dedicated on May 29, 1936.

World War II brought an end to the work of the CCC and WPA as well as a scaling back of park work in general until peace time. Then, fueled by a population eager to escape the stresses of wartime and an improving economy, an era of park system expansion began, with new state parks and recreation areas as well as facility expansion in many areas, especially in campgrounds. Camping increased tremendously in the 1950s and 60s, helped by improved roads and the development of the highway interstate system.

At Lake Ahquabi, camping was very popular; over the years, the campground location changed several times. The present 113 unit modern campground remains one of the most popular in the state park system and has been enhanced over the years with the addition of two modern shower buildings and upgraded electrical service at 85 sites.

Over the decades, the stone structures built by the CCC were heavily utilized and, by the 1980s, were showing their age. The original timbers and sandstone were deteriorating. Sandstone is a much less stable than limestone. Over the years, exposure to the elements caused severe erosion of the stone surfaces of the picnic shelter, lodge, and beach building.

In addition, utility systems were antiquated and the structures were not fully accessible to those with mobility impairments. At the beach, the formal concession area had been phased out and the beach building had effectively become a "white elephant." In the 1990s, the shelter and lodge were restored and updated and the beach building was converted into an open shelter facility retaining the character and "look" of the original 1930s architecture. A new concession building was added in 2014.

Over the decades, attention has been directed to the viability of Lake Ahquabi itself. Early concerns about siltation had come to pass. By the 1980s, the lake had been reduced from its 125 acres to 114 acres and water quality was also suffering from the intake of nutrients from the watershed with negative effects on the fishery and visitor usage.

A drawdown was done in 1993 to facilitate the most major lake renovation project in the park's history, including: spillway repairs, replacement of the outlet structure, shoreline protection, boat ramp and parking improvements, fishing jetties, an aeration system, fish habitat, and a unique year-round enclosed fishing pier. Also included was the removal of 309,000 cubic yards of silt from the lake basin and the construction of 17 silt ponds in the park and on adjacent properties to protect the lake from future siltation. Approximately 90% of the surrounding watershed has been treated to reduce siltation. The renovated lake was re-stocked with a variety of game fish species. As a result, visitation at the park quickly rebounded. In addition, park staff have undertaken an ambitious effort to manage park woodland resources by removing invasive plant species.

Lake Ahquabi State Park Existing Facilities	Quantity
Beach	1
Lodge	1
Shelters	3
Concession Building	1
Fishing Pier	1
Trails	6.1 miles
Boat Ramps	2
Campground - total sites	114
Electric campsites	85
Youth Group	1
Restroom - Seasonal	1
Restroom - Year-round	5

Table (above): Lake Ahquabi State Park Existing Facilities

A Roadmap for the Future of Lake Ahquabi State Park

Goal –

The over-riding goal of the recreation use plan is to enhance visitor outdoor recreation and education experiences by improving the facilities and trails at Lake Ahquabi State Park. This will promote visitor mental and physical health; encourage family time and making memories; protect natural resources for the future; create awareness and appreciation of the park's unique resources; and, generate economic activity in the region.

Objectives –

Overnight Facilities - Expand and Improve

Camping is currently the only option for staying overnight at Lake Ahquabi State Park. Cabin rentals at state parks across Iowa are becoming increasingly popular to users who prefer more amenities or do not have camping equipment.

Issues:

- Providing alternatives to camping would increase the variety of park users.
- The campground was last updated in 2005 and still requires some updating.

Proposals:

- Develop a cabin area with (8) year-round family cabins.
- Update campground facilities:
  - Upgrade (36) campsites to full hook-up service.
  - Replace year-round restroom.
  - Add check-in station.
  - Replace (2) trailer dump stations.
  - Enlarge overflow parking.

Picnic Areas - Enhance the existing picnic facilities

Issue:

- The North Shelter is in poor condition and deteriorating.

Proposal:

- Replace the North Shelter with a rustic style shelter (per the design guide).

Image (above): New "Design Guide" picnic shelter

Historic Restoration - Maintain the integrity of the park's historic structures

The stone lodge, beach building, restrooms, and picnic shelters were constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) from 1934 to 1937 utilizing the locally available sandstone material. These structures are a legacy to be treasured and enrich the park visitor's experience. Previous restoration efforts included the lodge (1988), shelter and restroom (1997), and the entrance portal (2014).

Issue:

- Historically significant structures and trails require ongoing maintenance and periodic restoration to preserve their integrity.

Proposals:

- Restore and update the (CCC) historic stone lodge.
- Add a portal to the park's north entrance, similar to the historic stone portal at the main park entrance.
- Continually monitor historic structures to identify necessary restoration efforts such as log rot repairs and stone tuck pointing.

Park Orientation and Interpretation - Increase way-finding and educational opportunities park-wide

Issue:

- In a park filled with natural and cultural resources, there are additional locations where signage would provide interpretive and educative opportunities.

Proposals:

- Add (2) entrance orientation panels to the north and south entrances.
- Add (2) 4-sided interpretive kiosks to: (1) campground, (1) beach area.
- Add (4) interpretive panels on the trails.

Image (above): "Nature-themed" play elements: climbing rocks

Playgrounds - Expand play opportunities for young park visitors

Issues:

- The older playground in the North Picnic Area has traditional equipment that provides limited, less challenging, non-wheelchair accessible play elements.
- There is a need for additional play opportunities elsewhere in the park.

Proposals:

- Add 2 playgrounds with "nature-themed" play elements to the campground including climbing rocks, log/tree trunks, sand, vine tunnels, and tall grasses.
- Add climbing rocks to the North Picnic Area, beach, and future cabin area.

Park Trail - Provide safe, enjoyable multi-use trail opportunities

Issue:

- The existing unpaved trail system is becoming worn out from weather and popular use.

Proposal:

- Top dress the park's 6 mile trail system with crushed rock.

Image (above): Water recreation on Lake Ahquabi

Park Headquarters - Enhance visitor access and provide efficient operational work and equipment storage facilities

Issues:

- Constructed in the 1930s, the existing park headquarters has outlived its usefulness in function. It is small, inefficient to operate, and does not accommodate today's larger equipment.
- The visitor entrance to the park office needs to be separate from the staff shop work space for public safety reasons.

Proposal:

- Construct a new park headquarters and shop in the location of the current metal shed.

Image (above): Historic stone Lodge at Lake Ahquabi State Park

Recreation Use Plan

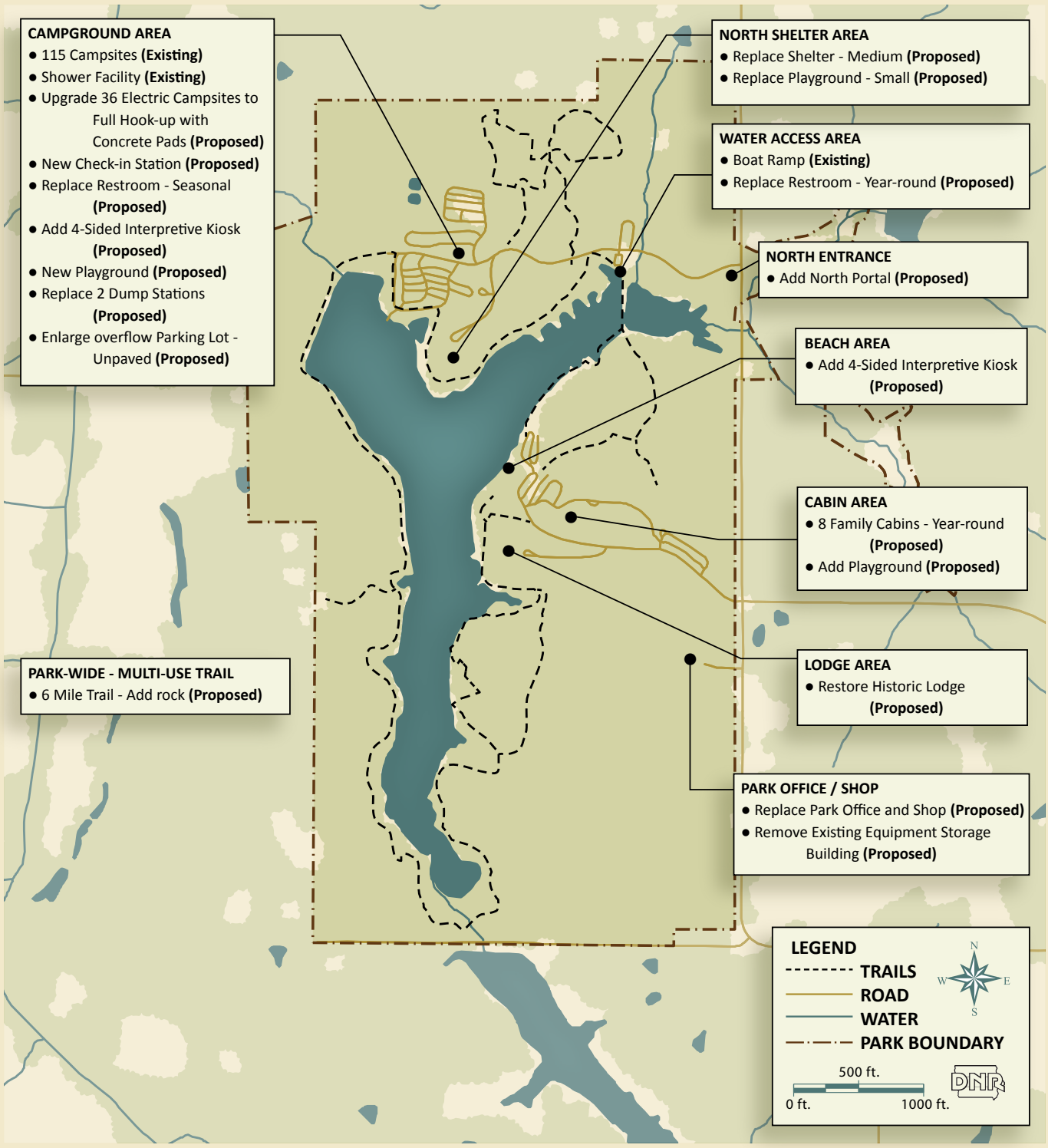
Implementation of the Lake Ahquabi Recreation Use Plan will help ensure that this classic Iowa state park remains a premier outdoor destination in the future. It has been prepared with the input of park staff. Future input will be sought from park visitors/ regional stakeholders as well. This will act as a detailed and practical blueprint for future action. All improvements will be completed with due regard for Lake Ahquabi State Park's unique natural resources and great scenic qualities.

The completion of a recreation use plan for each park will help determine the most effective allocation of funds on a project-by-project basis for the Iowa state park system as a whole. Lake Ahquabi's plan recommendations will be accomplished as necessary funding becomes available from ongoing sources as well as through partnering opportunities which may arise.

Lake Ahquabi State Park Recreation Use Plans Project Priorities

High Priority (1)	Cost Estimate
Restore historic stone Lodge	TBD
Replace year-round restroom - Campground	$75,000
Add check-in station - Campground	$30,000
Add (2) orientation panels - North/South Entrances	$8,000
Add (2) 4-sided interpretive kiosks - Campground and Beach Areas	$30,000
Add (4) interpretive panels - Trails	$16,000
Replace (2) trailer dump stations - Campground	$30,000
Replace park headquarters -	$510,000
High Priority Total:	**$TBD**
Medium Priority (2)	
Add playground - Campground	$80,000
Add (3) small playgrounds - North Picnic Area, Beach, Cabin Area	$90,000
Add (8) family cabins	$1,200,000
Resurface multi-use trail - Park-wide	TBD
Enlarge overflow parking - Campground	TBD
Medium Priority Total:	**$TBD**
Low Priority (3)	
Upgrade (36) campsites to full hook-up	$270,000
Replace North Shelter	$160,000
Add portal - North Entrance	$80,000
Low Priority Total:	**$510,000**

Table (above): Lake Ahquabi State Park's Project Priorities

Lake Ahquabi State Park Recreation Use Plan

Lake Ahquabi