



Villages of Van Buren County: A Great Place
Vision Plan
2023-2033



Vision and Purpose

To enhance the rich artistic, historic, and natural qualities that make Van Buren County a vibrant place to live and visit, and to serve as a catalyst for economic development.

Accomplishments

In the fourteen years since the state designated the Villages of Van Buren County an Iowa Great Place, we have realized or have made significant progress on the projects identified under previous designations. We



Improvements at Lake Sugema helped make this one of the county's most popular campgrounds. (courtesy of Van Buren County Conservation)

have completed Waubonsie Park in Cantril, the Stone House in Bentonsport, rehabilitation of Lacey-Keosauqua State Park Bathhouse and the CCC Gatehouse, and improvements to Morris Park as part of our original designation. Our vision plan submitted in 2018 included four additional projects. Despite the impact of the pandemic on planning, we have completed Lake Sugema electrical upgrades and roadway improvements. Conservation has secured funding for repairs to Morris Park cabins and the work will be done spring 2023. The Bentonsport nature trail and walking bridge will be constructed using in-house labor in 2023. Although we were unsuccessful in securing funding for the Odd Fellows Hall structural repairs and masonry restoration, we plan to stabilize this building in 2023. In short, the Villages of Van Buren County have been successful in achieving its goals identified in its vision plans from 2009 to 2023.

In addition, the Villages of Van Buren County has made significant progress on other placemaking initiatives that are related to, and which enhance, the work completed under the Great Places program. These projects underscore our small community's ability to work together and complete community projects. Highlights since the state first designated the county a Great Place include:

- Villages Folk School's Creative Escape Mentorship program through the generosity of the Iowa Arts Council, Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (2022-2023)
- Villages Folk School and Historic Hills Scenic Byway partnered on a sculpture to honor family farms (funding through an Arts Build Communities grant from the Iowa Arts Council, Our Town grant from

the National Endowment of Arts, Community Foundation of Van Buren County grant, and local donations)

- Hotel Manning Preservation Group acquired and rehabilitated the iconic Hotel Manning supported by a Community Catalyst Building Remediation grant and historic tax credits
- Van Buren County Historical Society secured funding from the Iowa Economic Development Authority to build a second story apartment in the historic Twombly Building (in progress)
- Former Bonaparte elementary school has been converted to house artist studios, small businesses, public library, and community hall
- Campground renovations at Lake Sugema and Bentonsport (new camping pads, improved access, and new shower house)
- Conservation hired its first naturalist in 2022
- Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa State University, Van Buren Trails Association, and Van Buren County Conservation developed the Lower Des Moines River Water Trail and enhanced river access. County Conservation has secured \$341,000 and the city of Keosauqua has secured \$356,000 for riverfront enhancements and access
- Trailhead Park was constructed along the Des Moines River in Keosauqua
- Ferguson Sports Complex was constructed in Keosauqua
- Major repairs to the public swimming pool in Keosauqua
- Van Buren County Hospital opened a \$2.2 million dollar Community Services Center housing a childcare center/preschool, Job Opportunities, Parents as Teachers, Healthy Villages, Occupational Health, an Optometrist, Head Start, WIC and conference room
- Birmingham Homecoming Committee constructed a stone shelter house and renovated a historic cabin
- Van Buren County Fair Board constructed Fair View Barn, for meetings and special events



Top: A local group has rehabilitated the iconic Hotel Manning which is once again a popular place for dining and lodging (courtesy of the Hotel Manning)

Bottom: The Lower Des Moines River Water Trail offers opportunities for tours featuring the region's archaeology, history, and natural history. (courtesy of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources)

Development of the new Vision Plan, 2023-2033

The committee responsible for leading the development of the Villages' new vision plan is composed of members who represent geographical diversity, key organizations, the arts, natural resources, history, business, local government, industry, and health and wellness. The lead organization for the Vision Plan is the Van Buren County Conservation which has overseen the county's Great Places designation since 2018, along with Villages of Van Buren, Inc., and the Villages Folk School which are key partners.

Great Places Steering Committee

Richard Daugherty, chair	Director, Van Buren County Conservation; Commissioner of Van Buren County Soil, Water and Conservation District; President of Pheasants Forever
Dorothy Gilbert	Van Buren County Conservation Board; Van Buren County Historic Preservation Commission; Villages of Van Buren board; Friends of Morris Park; Van Buren County Welcome Center board
Carol Gunn	Artist; retired teacher
Susan Hamilton-Trudell	Bentonsport business owner; AmeriCorps advisor; retired professor
Tonya Kisling	Birmingham City Council
Melissa Mahon	Mayor of Keosauqua; Engage Keosauqua; business owner
Mark Meek	Board of Supervisors; Van Buren County Conservation Board; Bonaparte business owner; Van Buren County Welcome Center board
Carroll Michalek	Artist; Engage Keosauqua; Van Buren County Trails Association
Paula Mohr	Preservation consultant; Villages of Van Buren board; Bentonsport Improvement Association board
Terry Jeffers Moore	Artist; Van Buren County Historic Preservation Commission
Ashley Moyer	Van Buren County Hospital; Empower Rural Iowa Board
Richard Nichols	Executive Vice President, First Iowa State Bank
Jennifer Palmer	Stockport City Clerk
James Pedrick	Douds resident; Iowa Wesleyan University Development Director; Douds Community Club; Douds Historic Preservation Association
Erica Pilcher	Milton City Council; local industry representative
Lisa Plecker	Van Buren County Auditor; Safe Coalition member
Suzu Pool	Douds resident; Van Buren County Historical Society
Mark Robertson	Friends of Lacey-Keosauqua State Park
Dillon Smith	Farmington business owner; Treasurer, Van Buren County Foundation
Emily Starnes	Executive Director, Villages of Van Buren; Rural Housing Trust Fund Board
Bob Steingreaber	Chair, Van Buren County Conservation Board

Melinda Stockwell

Artist; owner of Calico Press; Director, Villages Folk School; Van Buren County Welcome Center board

Jon Tharp

Retired, Van Buren County Sheriff's Office

In preparation for applying for redesignation, the committee met regularly to develop an inventory of the county's assets and a list of potential projects. Representatives of the committee also met with city councils and countywide organizations to explain the Great Places program, plans for redesignation, and to solicit project ideas. The committee launched a countywide survey in the fall to collect input from the public. We publicized this survey using social media, email, and in the local newspaper. Posters promoting the survey were placed at local businesses, libraries, and public buildings throughout the county. More than 200 individuals filled out the survey and offered input about the county's strengths, opportunities, and ideas for future projects.

Key takeaways from the public survey were:

- A majority of respondents said that quality of life keeps them in the county
- Respondents cited parks, nature, and outdoor opportunities as strong assets, but respondents expressed a desire for more trails (of all types) and a nature center
- Arts are highly valued in the county and there is an interest in more events and programs that showcase the arts
- Respondents meeting cited better stewardship of historic resources as a critical need

The committee evaluated ideas and selected projects that are consistent with creative placemaking, are feasible, and which have broad public support. The committee held a public meeting to present and discuss the vision plan in January 2023. The committee incorporated comments from the public into the application and vision plan.

Strategic Priorities

Our new Vision Plan is based on four core strategic priorities:

- Expand and enhance access to the arts
- Enhance access to nature and develop recreational opportunities
- Preserve and celebrate county's history and architecture
- Strengthen economic development and tourism program



Van Buren County's Greek Revival style courthouse is Iowa's oldest courthouse in continuous use. The Great Places committee has identified the restoration of this building as a priority project. (courtesy of Paul Larson, Van Buren County Historic Preservation Commission)

Work Plan (2023-2033)

Project	Lead organization(s)	Timeline
Establish a facility and satellite locations to house a nature/interpretive center and classroom spaces for adult and youth programming for the Villages Folk School	Van Buren County Conservation Villages Folk School City of Stockport Van Buren County Historical Society	5-10 years
Enhance and expand existing and future trail systems; possible locations include Douds-Lebanon-Keosauqua and/or Bonaparte-Bentonsport	Van Buren County Conservation Van Buren County Trails Association Van Buren County Hospital City of Bonaparte Douds Community Club	5-10 years
Continue development of water trail and river access in Pittsburg, Keosauqua, Bentonsport, and Farmington	Van Buren County Conservation City of Keosauqua Engage Keosauqua Iowa Department of Natural Resources City of Farmington	0-3 years
Bentonsport Bridge rehabilitation	Van Buren County Conservation Bentonsport Improvement Association Van Buren County Historic Preservation Commission	0-4 years
Preservation of the 1840 Courthouse	Van Buren County Supervisors Van Buren County Preservation Commission	0-5 years
Provide guidance and resources to owners of historic properties about reuse and rehabilitation opportunities	Van Buren County Historic Preservation Commission	0-2 years
Improvements to bath house and cabins at Indian Lake Park	City of Farmington	0-5 years
Development of 21 st century interactive media and online presence to engage the public and promote the county	Villages of Van Buren	0-10 years

A Snapshot of Van Buren County

One of our Great Places committee members describes Van Buren County as “small but mighty.” The county’s population is 7,203 (2020 census) making it the tenth smallest in the state. The county includes large Mennonite and Amish populations. Seven incorporated towns along with four unincorporated villages make up the “Villages of Van Buren.” Agriculture, retail, industry, and tourism fuel the local economy. Residents boast that there are no stoplights or chain restaurants in the county. Despite our strong rural qualities, Van Buren County’s independent telephone company provides service to most of the residents with a 100% fiber-optic network, enabling e-commerce, telecommuting, and robust telemedicine for the county hospital.



Van Buren County’s pastoral landscape includes these Amish hay shocks along Route J40. (Courtesy of Lora P. Conrad)

The Des Moines River, which bisects the county diagonally, was important to prehistoric and historic Native American people who occupied the lower Des Moines River valley. The river facilitated Euro-American settlement in the early nineteenth century and later steamboats navigated up the river as far as Des Moines. The county was organized in 1836 as part of the Wisconsin Territory and the county seat was established in Keosauqua in the geographic center of the county.

Two themes—historic preservation and art—have been important to the county’s identity for more than 50 years. In recognition of the county’s early history in Iowa and its well-preserved historic architecture, several individuals embarked on preserving the local history, well before the national preservation movement took hold. The Redhead family purchased historic property (including the storied Mason House) in Bentonsport in the late 1950s. The Redheads’ advocacy led the Van Buren County Conservation Board to acquire other threatened historic properties, clear the Bentonsport riverfront of a large junkyard, and create a public park



Rehabilitation of the Bentonsport Bridge, a pedestrian bridge, is one of the new Great Places projects. (Courtesy of the Bentonsport Improvement Association)

and rose garden within the old mill foundation. In 1969, the National Park Service listed Bentonsport on the National Register of Historic Places, making it the first district listed in the state. In the 1970s, Bentonsport became a center for artists who continue to live and work in the village today.

The Villages Folk School was incorporated in 2009 to provide learning opportunities in traditional arts and skills and these classes are held throughout the county. Both the Folk School and the Van Buren County Arts Council host popular plein air painting events. Villages of Van Buren, the county's tourism and economic development organization, traces its beginning to 1970. The county also benefits from the Historic Hills Scenic Byways which travels through four of the county's historic villages.

The state-designated Lower Des Moines River Water Trail also passes through the county. The county is home to Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, Shimek State Forest, Lake Sugema, Waubonsie Park, Indian Lake Park and county parks where nature lovers can hike, ride horses, watch birds, boat, fish, camp, and learn about local history. The County Conservation provides five points of access to the water trail, manages four campgrounds, eight wildlife areas and seven miles of trails, four historic buildings, and a historical museum. Van Buren

County is recognized as one of the best places in the Midwest for white tail deer hunting and has a state-designated bird conservation area. Van Buren County, because of its rural nature, also offers several areas for stargazing including the popular campground at Lake Sugema.

Signature countywide events include Fly Van Buren, Bike Van Buren, Scenic Drive Festival, J40 Farm Crawl, Paint Van Buren, Van Buren County Fair, and Christmas in the Villages. The Scenic Drive Festival alone attracts more than 15,000 attendees annually. Additionally, each village (incorporated and unincorporated) has an annual event.

Our county tourism organization widely markets the “Villages of Van Buren” brand, and the county is recognized statewide and regionally as a unique and authentic place to visit where visitors can enjoy the county’s quiet and pastoral landscape, rolling hills, broad Des Moines River valley, vibrant artist community, and historic architecture. The *Chicago Tribune* noted “Van Buren County still lives up to its past; in fact, its past never left.”



Bike Van Buren, now in its 37th year, draws bike enthusiasts from across the county. Residents and visitors desire more trails. (Courtesy of Villages of Van Buren, Inc.)



Keosauqua Riverfront Development Concept Plan

Keosauqua, Iowa

March 2022

This plan for the Keosauqua Riverfront is one piece of the vision plan's larger project to enhance river access. (courtesy of the City of Keosauqua)



The Van Buren County Conservation naturalist (far right) offers educational programming for children and adults during the county's events. The 10-year vision plan identifies a nature center with permanent exhibits and classrooms to supplement outdoor learning. (courtesy of Van Buren County Conservation)



Plein air painting is one of the Folk School's most popular events. The Great Places committee plans to create a permanent space for the Folk School studios, classroom, retail, and exhibition space for local artists. (courtesy of Villages Folk School)