

Van Buren County's Vision Plan (2023-2033)

Past. Present. Future.

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 Van Buren County was designated a Great Place, we have completed or have made significant progress on the projects identified under previous designations. Waubonsie Park in Cantril, the Stone House in Bentonsport (used as a community center and events space), rehabilitation of Lacey-Keosauqua State Park Bathhouse and the CCC Gatehouse, and improvements to Morris Park have been completed. Also completed are Lake Sugema electrical upgrades and roadway improvements. The Morris Park shower house is under construction. Funding for repairs to Morris Park cabins has been secured 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 addition to the projects identified in the Great Places vision plan, significant progress has been made on other placemaking initiatives. Highlights since 2009 include:

- Village 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)
- The county's first naturalist was hired in 2022
- Hotel Manning Preservation Group acquired and rehabilitated the iconic Hotel Manning
- 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)
- Iowa DNR, ISU, Van Buren Trails Association, and Van Buren County Conservation developed the Lower Des Moines 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 constructed along the Des Moines River in Keosauqua
- Ferguson Sports Complex 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 Child Care 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, a multipurpose meeting and special events center

Vision Plan (2023-2033) Development

The committee responsible for leading the development of the vision plan is composed of members who represent geographical diversity, key organizations, and 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 and the Villages Folk School.

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
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
Bob Steingreaber	Chair, Van Buren County Conservation Board
Mel 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

The committee met regularly to develop an inventory of the county’s assets and a list of potential projects. Representatives of the committee met with city councils and county wide organizations to explain the Great Places program, plans for redesignation, and to solicit project ideas. A countywide survey was launched in the fall to collect input from the public. This survey was publicized via social media and 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 completed 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 the respondents said that quality of life keeps them in the county
- Parks, nature, and outdoor opportunities were cited 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
- Better stewardship of historic resources was cited as a critical need

The committee evaluated ideas and selected projects that were consistent with creative placemaking, are feasible, and which have public support. A public meeting to present and discuss the vision plan was held in January 2023.

Strategic Priorities

The 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

Work Plan (2023-2033)

Project	Lead organization(s)	Timeline
Establish a facility and satellite locations that house a nature/interpretive center and classroom spaces for adult and youth programming for the Villages Folk School	Van Buren County Conservation Village 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	0-4 years
Preservation of the 1840 Courthouse	Van Buren County Supervisors	0-5 years

	Van Buren County Preservation Commission	
Improvements to bath house and cabins at Indian Lake Park	City of Farmington	0-5 years
Development of 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. 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.

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 and facilitated Euro-American settlement in the early nineteenth century. 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 and rose garden within the old mill foundation. In the 1970s, Bentonsport became a center for artists who live and work in the village.

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. 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 Historic Hills Scenic Byways 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 several 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, historic buildings and historic areas. 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. The County also offers several areas for star gazing.

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.

The “Villages of Van Buren” branding is widely marketed, and the county is recognized statewide and regionally as a unique and authentic place to visit. The *Chicago Tribune* noted “Van Buren County still lives up to its past; in fact, its past never left.” Van Buren County is regionally known for its quiet and pastoral landscape, rolling hills, broad Des Moines River valley, historic architecture, and vibrant artist community.