

Iowa Cabins Task Force

The Cabins Book:

# Public Policy Discussion

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Iowa Parks Foundation  
5905 Harwood Drive  
Des Moines, Iowa 50312

First Edition

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Author and Editor: Joseph R. Gunderson  
[gunderson.joseph.r@gmail.com](mailto:gunderson.joseph.r@gmail.com)

Co-Author and Co-Editor: Hans Klein-Hewett  
[hansk@iastate.edu](mailto:hansk@iastate.edu)

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# Introduction

During the process of creating *The Cabins Book* and the *What We Don't Know* booklet, the Iowa Cabins Task Force came upon several ideas that solidly landed in the realm of policy decisions. While the Task Force found them valuable, they did not feel they were appropriate to endorse because the ideas involve multiple jurisdictions, legislative directives, and/or long-standing traditions. However, the Task Force felt that the ideas should still be documented and shared due to the value of the ideas and the potential for direct impact on the broader cabin system in Iowa. This booklet collects and shares the policy discussions for informational purposes only.

It is important to note that the Iowa Cabins Task Force did not submit the topics below to a majority vote, or even come to some consensus on the topics selected. Hence, there is no endorsement. That non-consensus approach was intentional, because the purpose of this portion of the Task Force effort is only to introduce ideas and areas of concern for ongoing discussion and consideration. The ideas in this document are not attributable to or the responsibility of any particular Task Force participant, contributor, presenter, or editor. Where these ideas and areas of concern end up is something for another day and another forum. That being said, we on the Task Force feel that keeping those discussions moving forward is important in order to reach our goal of "Getting More People into More Parks More Often."

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# Chapter I: Collaborating Between Jurisdictions

With the advent of communicative and collaborative technology permeating almost every aspect of our private and professional lives (i.e., email, texting, collaborative software, etc.), it is imperative that public recreation and particularly cabins, take full advantage of collaboration to best serve people and build support for parks and public recreation. Otherwise, all who cherish our parks and public spaces risk losing relevancy, effectiveness, and support as the world moves on without us and our input. Below are a few ways that may do just that, between parks, park systems, and private recreation providers.

## 1. Consolidating Cabin Reservation Websites

Leaders may consider a jointly operated, mutually beneficial, single-source state and county park system reservation website for all Iowa public recreation cabins, and possibly privately-operated cabins as well.

At one time, the DNR Parks Bureau and the County Conservation Association discussed the possibility of sharing a cabin and campsite reservation website. For a variety of reasons, each decided to pursue a separate website. (See [www.iowadnr.gov/Places-to-Go/State-Parks/Iowa-State-Parks/ParkDetails](http://www.iowadnr.gov/Places-to-Go/State-Parks/Iowa-State-Parks/ParkDetails); [www.mycountyparks.com](http://www.mycountyparks.com)). There may now be reasons to reconsider that approach and work toward a combined reservation website, or at least a more coordinated dual website system.

Among the reasons to combine or coordinate websites are at least the following:

- Two websites with different standards and payment systems for reservations can be confusing to park users
- Possible cost savings to maintain and improve a common website for both park systems
- Possible revenue enhancement due to more effective marketing and public awareness
- Potential for innovation for multi-day and multi-park camping experiences
- Seamless cross-referral among cabin and camping assets and among the park systems
- Shared park user feedback on park assets, operations and programming
- The opportunity to develop cutting-edge web-based “experience” based park use

Counter-arguments to combined web-based reservations include:

- Expense of combining two already developed systems;
- Possible differences in priorities and pricing between parks and park systems; and
- Potential loss of the opportunity to experiment with web-based features with only one system, versus two systems.

## **2. Organizing Cabins Based on Experiences**

Leaders may consider whether all Iowa public recreation cabins and possibly privately-operated cabins as well should be part of one “experienced-based” mutually beneficial recreation planning website.

Extended vacations and single recreation site selections are increasingly being determined by the “experience” the user seeks. For instance, cabin clusters lend themselves to family reunions, wedding parties, and multi-family gatherings; isolated cabins suggest time to be alone or reflect; “rustic” cabins might bring back north-woods memories; cabins with panoramic views might suggest inspiration; and cabins near lakes might attract grandparents wanting to panfish with grandkids. The common denominator is being able to search for cabins by the “experience” offered, not just geographic proximity.

Not surprisingly, vacation and recreation marketing track this customer preference. Some park systems (i.e., the Grant Woods Loop: [www.gwloop.com](http://www.gwloop.com)) have already adopted this recreational experience-based approach in Iowa. (See [www.iaparks.org/cabins-task-force](http://www.iaparks.org/cabins-task-force); [www.iaparks.org/parks-to-people](http://www.iaparks.org/parks-to-people)). That approach was also detailed in the Iowa Green Ribbon Commission Parks to People Strategic Plan. There seems to be no reason it could not also apply to cabin experiences: differentiating cabins by the amenities associated at the cabin site as well as the amenities offered in the park where the cabin is located.

## **3. Utilizing Rating Systems, Media Feedback, and Referrals**

Leaders may consider an easy-to-use, cross-park systems rating technology, uniform customer web-based feedback mechanism, and automatic cabin referral system applicable to all Iowa public recreation cabins, and possibly including privately operated cabins as well.

Movies, hotels, restaurants, doctors, and tourist destinations are increasingly rated on a one-to-five star scale, indicating customer satisfaction with the facilities and experience. (See [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com); [www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com)). Is there something like that we could do for cabins? Star systems could impact decisions on rental rates for park managers, which would then give cabin renters the ability to select the amount they want to spend, based on several accommodation and experience-based options. This approach also lends itself to public commentary (likes and dislikes) and referrals among parks and park systems. This approach now dominates the private recreational and public accommodations sector; it won’t be long before the public recreation sector will necessarily adapt.

It is important to note that cross-referrals among different types of cabin operators occurs today, albeit the old-fashioned way (phone calls and emails), rather than automatic technology-based referrals. For instance, there are active referrals today between state park cabin operators and county park cabin operators (i.e., Pine Lake State Park and Hardin County Conservation, Tower Rock Park). There are also active and ongoing referrals between local private cabin operators and national cabin operators managing public facilities under contract (i.e., Honey Creek cabin manager and locally adjacent private cabin operators). It seems like a small step to make these referrals automatic and technology-based.

#### 4. Focusing on Users, Staying Flexible on Jurisdictional Boundaries

Leaders may consider an expansion of financing mechanisms (i.e. Iowa Code Chapter 28E) to allow for maximum flexibility to deliver public recreation services, especially cabins, across Iowa's federal, city, county, and state park systems and public lands, possibly including privately operated cabins as well.

Cabin users, as a whole, do not care if they rent a cabin from a city, county, or state agency – they care about its “experience”, location and access to amenities. Therefore, if city, county, and state park systems can be cooperative, flexible, and creative in how they locate and fund public recreation cabins in Iowa, all entities will reap the benefits. There are many examples – including some in Iowa – that show how sharing benefits everyone.

A great example of this type of collaboration is the Lake Icaria Park state/county cabin model. Lake Icaria Park is all state land, but half is managed by the state as a wildlife and recreation area, and half is managed by Adams County Conservation for more typical park use, including an extensive cabin operation. The county builds and operates the cabins; the state builds some of the park infrastructure (i.e., roads, etc.) and gets input on the location and design of cabins, including two new luxury, year-around cabins on the lake. At the end of the day, both entities get to see the benefits from increased attendance and occupancy rates.<sup>1</sup>

#### 5. Adopting a Regional Approach to Cabin Planning

Cabin advocates may consider that voluntary regional cabin planning efforts can be a way to expand the pool of users and balance capital costs.

We have found through the Parks to People (P2P) projects that counties find great results when they join together, pool resources and amenities, and organize events and volunteers toward a common goal. Organizing that voluntary impulse around cabins seems like a logical next step. A ready example is the consideration given by Webster County to the existing cabin development in Hamilton County. The two counties and Boone County formed the Boone Forks Region in 2017. Right now, Webster County is experimenting with “Tiny Cabins” built by Prison Industries and luxury Yurts. Hamilton County focuses on year-around cabins of different sleeping capacities, while maintaining the quality of its existing single room camper cabins. Combined, they are offering a broad range of opportunities to their constituents and expanding ideas of what cabin experiences can be available in Central Iowa.

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<sup>1</sup> This certainly is a model that several under-served urban areas in Iowa could emulate, where there are too few public recreation cabins, but available and desirable state or federal land. An example is the Marion County cabins, constructed adjacent to Lake Red Rock on land leased from the state and owned by the Army Corp of Engineers. The land surrounding Saylorville Lake (i.e., Big Creek State Park and Army Corp of Engineers operated RV and picnic areas), reflect prime cabin development locations, which Polk County may be in a position to fund and operate. Similarly, there is some state park land and city park land around Dubuque that satisfy the same criteria. Unused cabin pads in Brushy Creek State Park near Fort Dodge offer an opportunity. Flexibility and creativity applied across the state may be the answer.

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# Chapter II: Making Decisions Locally

Over the last thirty years, local decision making has become a trend which has made its mark on Iowa's public recreation assets. Centralized public recreation decision-making is on the outs; local decisions based upon local input are on the rise. Consider the statistics associated with the growth of the county and city park systems. Iowa has the only statewide county park system in the country and the growth over the last thirty years of the collective county parks in terms of acreage, number of parks, recreational facilities, staffing, and budgets is extraordinary. For instance, there are over 250 county park cabins and over eighty state park cabins. (See [www.iaparks.org/cabins-task-force](http://www.iaparks.org/cabins-task-force)) That growth is all locally driven. Additional examples of locally driven recreation development beyond cabins includes the four P2P regional boards, the local land trusts, the local state park friend's groups, and the recreational funding approved through local city and county bond and tax initiatives. See footnote one for additional comments.

## 1. Utilizing Local Funding Sources

Cabin development demands a level of local thinking in order to understand the market in which the cabins exist. Leaders may consider whether principal funding sources should at least be organized locally to insure "skin in the game." One area that is not being utilized fully is flexible and creative funding mechanisms to provide capital improvement dollars. Local actors (i.e. boards of supervisors, community foundations, trade associations, and private individual and corporate donors, as well as, local banks or credit unions) can be tapped to provide local support and marketing for a project. For example, bank or credit union loans, fundamentally based on the cash flow-positive characteristics of public recreation cabins, can reinforce community buy-in for regional parks. Outside of funding institutions and individuals, the creative use of intra-jurisdictional funding sources (intra-county loans, levy-based funding, etc.) can be tapped to ensure local dollars are being used to improve local amenities. See *The Cabins Book*, Chapter V.

## 2. Building the Cabins Users Want

Leaders may consider bypassing the construction of less-expensive camper cabins in order to construct year-around cabins, which are proving consistently to be more popular with Iowans. Camper cabins (i.e., no plumbing, single room and electricity available for seasonal use, roughly \$20K-30K per cabin) are some of the least expensive cabins to build. Because of that, they are often built out of necessity – park leaders want cabins and camper cabins are the cheapest way to get that done. Others who are considering them mentioned a desire to use them to "test the market" before proceeding with year-around cabins (i.e., fully plumbed, multi-room, amenity-rich, roughly \$130K to \$250K per cabin). However, the popularity of camper cabins has declined in the last twenty years. One of our cabin experts observed that there were few or no known camper cabins built or installed in county or state parks in the last five years. Further, several park managers who did build camper cabins within the last ten years expressed regret, wishing they would have built the year-around cabins instead. With the strong suggestion that year-around cabins are the clear trend in both state and county parks, leaders may want to strongly consider finding additional funding sources to build year-around cabins, even if it is their first foray into the cabin market, in order to build the amenities that people want the first time. It does increase the risk, but it immediately expands the market of possible cabin users.

Along with this idea is the concept of moving or re-using camper cabins. A suggestion brought to the Task Force was selling and moving camper cabins when the park is replacing them with year-around cabins. That way, the inexpensive cabins could be used as pilot projects for counties looking to get into the cabin market. The Task Force is not aware of an instance where this has been done, but it has been suggested as an alternative benefitting everyone because the cabins would be inexpensive and materials wouldn't be wasted. Even if new camper cabins are initially constructed or installed, leaders may want to consider making their constructed camper cabins transportable. That way the cabins could be moved or sold in a mutually advantageous way with another park system in Iowa.

# Chapter III: Creating Strong and Healthy Connections

One of the most impactful trends in public recreation is the multitude of connections. They include both road shoulder and separately constructed bike-riding, horseback-riding, and walking trails, as well as ever increasing water or paddling trails across Iowa counties, regions, or completely across (or along the borders of) the state. Given all of these existing resources, maybe we are ready to start thinking in terms of connections for multi-day public recreation opportunities. How do cabins fit into this larger trend? Cabins could be the link between one or more of these existing public recreation assets and could allow families to plan and enjoy single-night or extended-stay vacations across Iowa.

## 1. Adding Cabins to your Community Connection Plans

Leaders may consider whether cabins offer a readily accessible overnight accommodation of choice for those enjoying our connected parks and communities. This may be a relatively simple idea, but it is likely time to consider public recreation lodging as a part of Iowa's general outdoor recreation experiences. That means considering the use of cabins and other overnight accommodations as ways to extend the stay of existing guests and drawing in new users by the amenities that cabins provide. This can greatly impact our local communities through the extended patronage of restaurants, grocery stores, and local tourist attractions because people are staying longer in one spot and/or travelling between Iowa "spots" in a planned way.

## 2. Building Strong Public-Private Partnerships

Leaders may consider expanding Iowa's more recent tradition of effective public-private partnerships to exponentially, but methodically, expand public recreation cabin opportunities in Iowa over the next ten years. Public-private partnerships did not exist in their present form at the birth of Iowa's state park system in 1921, or even Iowa's (statewide) county park system in 1950s. Now those partnerships exist and fuel many of the changes our park systems are experiencing today. See the Appendix for a brief history of the partnerships in Iowa.

Public-private partnerships may be mandatory to complete future capital improvements in our parks. With the increasing construction cost of major improvements, these relationships can provide funds, volunteer support, and a dedicated source of users. Therefore, developing partnerships early will have long-term benefits. Recognizing this public-private partnership trend and its impact on recreation development in Iowa, what should be done to preserve and expand that dynamic for the benefit of our parks? How do cabins fit into the public-private partnership model? They may just be the key to multi-day recreational experiences in Iowa, whether that is a multi-day single park experience, or a bike-riding, horseback-riding, walking or paddling trip across counties, regions or completely across the state. Ireland, England, Scotland and Norway all boast an extensive cabin system to accommodate the recreational adventures of residents and tourists alike. Why not Iowa? To get an understanding of the statewide effort underway, see [www.traveliowa.com/getinspiredetails/iowa-s-year-round-camping-cabins/31](http://www.traveliowa.com/getinspiredetails/iowa-s-year-round-camping-cabins/31).

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# Chapter IV: Utilizing Matching Funds to Stretch Dollars

Park advocates may consider establishing or expanding available base-match funding sources for cabin construction, at the county, city, and state levels. Base-match funding is not a new concept in Iowa public recreation. REAP grants have used base-match funding models, as have private organizations such as the Wellmark Foundation and the MidAmerican Foundation. Most recently, IPF (executing the desires of the Governor/Lieutenant Governor and the Legislature to implement the findings of the Green Ribbon Commission and P2P program), required a 5:1 match for the first P2P region, the Grant Wood Loop. Starting with a base match amount of \$1.9 million, the Grant Wood Loop leadership gathered together some \$52 Million plus match amounts for regional public recreation projects, racking up an astounding 26:1 plus match ratio. See [www.iaparks.org/parks-to-people](http://www.iaparks.org/parks-to-people), under Grant Wood Loop.

Now, how do cabins fit that trend? One answer might be that cabins are ideally suited for base-match funding for several reasons, including:

- Cabins are one of a handful of cashflow positive recreation assets in a park generally
- Cabins are tangible, and tangible assets are among the first projects attracting matching funds
- Cabin use is uniquely measurable and quantifiable in terms of “pay-back” in not just dollars, but more importantly, “family hours” in our parks
- We have data and a track record for cabin success and use, and funders target projects with those characteristics

If we use the P2P model for base-match funding, we believe park managers could expect a 5:1 match ratio for their projects. That means \$500K investment produces 25 new year-around cabins; \$1 million produces 50 new year-around cabins. Using the base-match method assures that some of the lessons learned and reflected in *The Cabins Book* are available for the benefit of all Iowans.

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# Chapter V: Gathering and Utilizing Data

Data analysis is starting to establish itself within the public recreation realm due the desire of park systems to prove their value to their regulating bodies and funders. New technology is aiding in this effort, with technology that is just starting to accurately measure the amount and particular recreational segments of park use. Privacy issues surrounding such technology will be addressed along-side all of the now percolating technology/privacy policy debates occurring across American and around the world.

Unfortunately, Iowa is not leading this data use and analysis charge; however, we do have a wealth of raw data at our fingertips that is not being utilized. Between Iowa's cabin experts and the dual web-based electronic reservation systems already in place, we have a lot of existing information that is waiting to be mined. (See [www.iowadnr.gov/Places-to-Go/State-Parks/Iowa-State-Parks/ParkDetails](http://www.iowadnr.gov/Places-to-Go/State-Parks/Iowa-State-Parks/ParkDetails); [www.mycountyparks.com](http://www.mycountyparks.com); [www.iaparks.org/cabins-task-force](http://www.iaparks.org/cabins-task-force)). Let's use that data. And then let's be the first state in the union to modernize our public recreation investment choices, starting with cabins. Having not yet tapped that rich vein of data, this booklet starts with anecdotal evidence, hoping to build from there. See also *What We Don't Know* and *The Cabins Book* by the Iowa Cabins Task Force.

Gathering operational experiences means continuing to encourage forums, engage in web-based chatroom opportunities, and methodically visit parks and cabin operations. Collecting and organizing this invaluable information from 99 county park systems, some 250 county public recreation cabins, 80 state park cabins, scores of private cabins, and then revising *The Cabins Book* periodically to reflect that growing bank of experience would place and maintain Iowa at the forefront of public recreation cabin design, construction, and operation movement. Iowa families and other park users could only benefit from those efforts.

Identifying unexplored questions is how any great search starts—and we are searching for the best outcomes for public recreation cabin design, construction and operations. Examining the data and gathering operational experiences will inform the development of these questions about what we don't know now. Updating the *What We Don't Know* booklet will keep this approach alive and relevant.

Finally, combining everything from *The Cabins Book* and the *What We Don't Know* booklet will allow us to develop practical, non-binding, but illuminating "best practices" for public recreation cabin design, construction and operations. We are not ready yet, but we will be. Leading the development of those best practices is now and will continue to be our Iowa County and State Park managers. These best practices may then be of some benefit across the nation.

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# A1: History of Public-Private Recreation Partnerships in Iowa

A brief history of the most prevalent public-private partnerships is instructive. The first truly statewide impactful effort at public-private partnerships occurred with the founding and growth of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF), starting in 1979. The INHF represented a tidal-wave change in how land-based public recreation projects were identified, prioritized, initially funded and ultimately returned to public ownership and use, as incorporated into our state, county, city and township park systems. Private citizens, acting collectively through the INHF, greatly expanded traditional parklands. INHF was the first decades-long opportunity for groups of private citizens (i.e., individuals, businesses, trade associations and non-profits) to steadfastly mold Iowa's public recreation assets, which is most evident in the ever-expanding public bike, river/water trail and walking trail systems found throughout Iowa. INHF also spawned a small but growing pool of "land trusts" to perform these same functions but with even more locally funded and controlled. The state, county, city and township park systems themselves were willing and active planners and participants in many of these INHF land-based public recreation projects. In the last ten years, INHF has also taken on an aggressive role as political advocate for increasing and making much more reliable, a public statewide funding source. Certainly, this was a purpose behind REAP, and more recently, I-WILL and the proposed related 3/8ths cent sales tax increase.

The second statewide impactful public-private partnership is the newest: the Iowa Parks Foundation (IPF). Still in its evolutionary stage, the IPF's core mission is to formalize and support ongoing and public collaboration among state, county, city and township park systems on a regional basis to substantially increase public recreation opportunities and broaden public use of our existing park systems. Its second core mission is enhancement of park operations, assets and amenities to "get more people into more parks more often." Created through the Governor's Green Ribbon Commission in 2014, there are now four self-identified regions, covering some 15 counties, including the Grant Woods Loop, Loess Hills Region, Boone Forks Region and Glacial Lakes Region. Regions start with a broad-based regional plan and a base-match amount, and proceed to act through locally controlled governing bodies to collect cash and non-cash assets to methodically carry out prioritized regional public recreation projects through match funding.

The third ongoing public-private partnership structure involves the friend's groups associated with some, but not all, state parks. Each of these friend's groups started at different times, for different reasons, and have gone through periods of strong membership and major impact, and then periods when that has been much less true. But when a friend's group is strong, the impact locally is undeniable. For instance, the friend's group associated with Lake Darling State Park was both a political force when the lake needed major renovation, but also provided major grant-writing resources and direct local funding resources for specific park assets, like top-grade year-around cabins and a park lodge.

The fifth growing example of public/private partnerships involves private local foundations, both general community foundations and local recreation-specific foundations. The Iowa West Foundation, an example of a regional community foundation, has been working in concert with the Pottawattamie Conservation Foundation, an example of a conservation board-related foundation, to fund projects in the Loess Hills Region.

See [www.iowawestfoundation.org](http://www.iowawestfoundation.org) and [www.pottawattamieconservationfoundation.com](http://www.pottawattamieconservationfoundation.com) for more information. Similarly, the Appanoose Conservation Foundation has been working with the city park system in Centerville. See [www.facebook.com/appanooseconservationfoundation](http://www.facebook.com/appanooseconservationfoundation) for more information. Any one of these foundation relationships can be a model for future recreation partnerships.