

Iowa Cabins Task Force

The Cabins Book:

What We Don't Know

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First Edition

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Introduction

This booklet has two purposes: the first is to document what is known and unknown when it comes to making decisions about public recreation cabins. The second purpose is to shed light on the specific areas where further research and investment is needed in order to fill in the gaps of knowledge that will only make future cabin projects more feasible and revenue positive. When the Iowa Cabins Task Force was being formed, this booklet wasn't even a consideration; the very goal of the project was to collect information and fill in the gaps in knowledge. However, the Task Force soon discovered that the energy to fill the gaps was bigger than the Task Force could handle alone. The data is largely there, but the synthesis effort will take time and energy outside of what we could provide. Therefore, the Task Force created this booklet so future efforts can build on our experience.

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Chapter I: Deserving Further Study

Why is it worthwhile to fill the gaps in knowledge? Why do we need a booklet entitled *What We Don't Know* and who cares if we don't know it? Those are reasonable questions to ask; there are straight-forward answers.

1. The Current Investment?

Currently, we are building public recreation infrastructure without hard evidence that proves that it's going to work, let alone work well. If you combine the costs for the estimated 330 public recreation cabins existing in Iowa in 2019, the roads, utilities, and site preparation associated with those cabins, and the expenses of ten years of standard maintenance, one could easily estimate between \$750 million to \$1 billion in public/private investment in park cabins in Iowa alone. However, there is little in terms of a systematic and data-driven approach that argues why that massive public investment is worthwhile and/or profitable. There are literally tens of billions of dollars of public recreation cabin investments across America, and we have little or no methodological study or reliable data analysis on what we are doing, what we should be doing, and what we are getting in return. We challenge all cabin advocates to identify any existing and applicable study about the issues raised in this booklet and *The Cabins Book*.

2. The Potential for Financial Sustainability?

Cabins are among the few cash flow-positive park investments currently available to governing bodies and park advocates. This is largely due to no land costs or taxes, existing staffing systems, and the access to free park amenities for users. Therefore, cabins, along with RV pads, commonly provide the most income to a park system. Given the trend of decreasing public investment in parks, it only makes sense to make smart investments in park infrastructure so the parks can be more financially sustainable in the future. See *The Cabins Book*, Chapter V for our current ideas on possible funding strategies for public cabins.

3. The Potential for Increased Park Patronage?

Park managers have seen it coming for decades: tent camping is a tiny fraction (maybe 2-3%) of overnight parks use in the upper Midwest. No one knows for sure, but some speculate that demographics may be one reason: seniors may be unable or disinclined to tent-camp, parents may have less time to do camping preparations, and technology addictions (and its sedentary side-effects) are disincentivizing people of all ages from the extra effort involved in tent camping.

Instead of tent camping, most overnight stays in the Midwest are accomplished with an RV, which is not an undesirable form of recreation. However, the inherent cost to acquire an RV creates a barrier that discourages many demographics. RVs require accessible wealth, considerable time, and physical ability to be a worthwhile investment. Those requirements tend to create RV campgrounds which are inhabited by people of similar socio-economic status, which can unfortunately be perceived as unwelcoming to people outside that group. That means there are large swaths of the population who may never spend a night in a park because of the undesirable or unattainable lodging options.

To counter that trend, we need a range of available and accessible public recreation cabins. We want urban kids and kids from single parent households in parks overnight and for

as many days as we can keep them there. We want seniors and disabled people in parks overnight to spend time with family and friends. We want citizens who cannot buy an RV to still have an affordable and comfortable accommodations in our parks. However, to accomplish those goals, further study is needed so we can make cabin construction feasible, improve design, and greatly enhance the cabin experience to increase the occupancy rates for all lowans. See *The Cabins Book* for more information on our current strategies and recommendations for cabin accessibility and amenities.

4. The Potential Public Health Impact?

There are numerous studies which prove that time spent in nature has measurable benefits to the physical and mental health of individuals and communities. However, there is no known empirical study which identifies the public health effects of public recreation cabins. The benefits would appear to be many: cabins provide a low-cost, comfortable, and accessible gateway to nature, friends, and family. But until the research exists, it's hard to make the claim. We should study the impact of existing cabins, as well as potential improvements to design, construction and operation to enhance those health effects and make the argument for cabin construction that much stronger.

5. The Future of Park Investment?

As mentioned above, public investment has been decreasing for our public parks. There is a need to attract investment of all types so our parks are sustainable in the future. If we can develop a baseline of information that clearly demonstrates the benefits of cabins for our park systems, we think the argument for financial support from all sources will be stronger. This booklet, *Public Policy Discussion* booklet, and *The Cabins Book* demonstrate the need. Now we just require the access and willingness to act.

Chapter II: What We Do Know

Iowa has some unique research assets available. Reservation websites for county and state parks (www.mycountyparks.com and www.iowastateparks.reserveamerica.com respectively) have been collecting data on cabin rates, occupancy, and basic demographics for years. The county conservation system also does periodic in-person interviews and online or paper surveys of cabin-related practices and issues. Because of Iowa's county park system, we have ninety-nine county park systems which are acting as public recreation laboratories, resulting in a broad spectrum of different cabins, operational practices, and financial results. On the private cabin side, there are several options in Iowa, often found through broader online accommodation websites (www.iowacabinrentals.com, www.homeaway.com, www.vacaguru.com, www.airbnb.com to name a few), however, that is all currently private information. It may be an avenue to consider mining, if any of the private companies would be amendable.

We also have an abundance of anecdotal evidence, mostly coming to the Iowa Cabins Task Force from various state and county cabin managers, private cabin owners, and from cabin fabricators and contractors. *The Cabins Book* is the synthesis of that available information. It focuses on what the Task Force considers best design and management practices for the development and operation of a cabin initiative. While that information is incredibly valuable, it is not empirically tested. Realistically, it is the available information that we have from the best people we could find. That always means that there are other voices out there that were not interviewed that may have different points of view.

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Chapter III: What We Don't Know

While we know a lot, the quantity of items we don't know - or perhaps more accurately, the things we don't empirically know – is immense. Below, we start with a list of questions that have been developed that are ripe for further investigation.

1. Existing Cabin Facilities

- How many camper and year-round cabins are in county and/or state parks?
- How many are on county park land (or state park land managed by the county)?
- How many are in state parks (and managed by the DNR)?
- What sizes in square footage and general design are these cabins?
- What is the age of the cabins?
- What is the gross revenue for all county and/or state park cabins?
- What is the average annual revenue per cabin across all county and/or state park cabins?
- What is the average annual direct expenses per cabin across all county and/or state park cabins?
- What is the average occupancy rate per cabin across all county and/or state park cabins?
- What is the average marketing expense per cabin across all county and/or state park cabins?
- What percentage of those cabins have available distinct types of park amenities (i.e., lake, river, hiking trails, biking trails, boat rental, panoramic views)?
- What is the financing mechanism used for cabin construction (county direct funding, county-based loans, outside grants, private donations)?
- What has been the change in any of the above numbers over the last 10 years?
- What cabins in what parks have underperformed or failed and why?

2. Cabin Amenities, Design, and Construction

What is the impact of the following cabin design decisions and amenities on revenue, expenses (staffing, upfront costs, and/or maintenance), occupancy rates, and/or diversity of renters?

A. Internal Cabin Design Decisions

- Elevated or ground level entrance
- Handicap accessible (front or side or back)
- Number of entrances (typically one or two)
- Cabin size (inside common areas and number it can sleep)
- One story, one and one-half story, or two story
- Size (square footage) of floor plan—20x32, 12x20, etc.
- Size and number of bedrooms

- Private bedrooms or public (bunk-house style) bedrooms
- Quality or size of beds (king, queen, twin, bunk)
- Number of people sleeping in a cabin versus the size, location, and number of common internal spaces
- Loft or remote kids specific play or gaming area
- Full or limited kitchen
- Configuration of kitchen counter and/or color/materials
- Number of bathrooms or showers
- Storage closet
- Closets for suitcases (with or without doors, hanging rod, suitcase stands)
- In-cabin laundry facilities
- Great room
- Fireplace (wood-burning, gas, or electric)
- Vaulted or general high ceilings
- Interior wall material (wood, drywall, stone, or other)
- Sun rooms
- Large front picture windows or dormer windows
- French doors
- Number and size of windows generally
- Location, degree, or type of lighting (inside and outside)
- Skylights
- Floor material (wood, vinyl, or linoleum)
- Wood burning stove
- Walk-out basement

B. External Cabin Design Decisions

- Porches (elevated or ground level; covered or uncovered; front, back or side; screened in or not; with ceiling fan or not)
- Parking lot size and proximity
- Roof pitch and material
- Concrete slab, block, pole or footings (elevated or non-elevated) foundation
- Exterior façade material: wood (stained or unstained), metal, concrete, or vinyl siding
- Solid log construction or wood (half-log) siding (stained or unstained)
- Fire pit or fire ring
- Game/fish cleaning table
- Dog kennel facilities
- Horse tying posts or corral

C. Cabin Placement and Siting

- Hard or gravel road access
- Solar exposure and building orientation
- Remoteness of cabin in a park
- Cabin size diversity in cabin groupings (1, 2, or 3 cabins together and what size mix)
- Distance between grouped cabins
- Distance between grouped cabins and a gathering cabin/rented community space
- Proximity of lake or river
- Proximity of panoramic view
- Size and proximity to RV or tent-camping facilities
- Proximity to meeting hall or other public meeting place
- Proximity to hiking, mountain biking or road biking trails (variety, number, how long, looped, terrain)
- Proximity to coffee shop, town, or convenience store
- Proximity to other overnight accommodation options (B&B, motel, public or private cabins)
- Proximity of mature trees, prairie, and other native vegetation
- Proximity of open grassy mowed areas
- Placement and quality of planted landscape materials

D. Adjacent Park Amenities

- Park day use numbers
- Adjacent laundry facilities
- Snowmobiling or cross country skiing trails
- Concrete walking trails
- Hunting land
- Birding land and facilities
- Lake, pond or river (size, motor usage)
- Fish population, size, and variety
- Beach
- Canoeing/kayaking
- Courtesy or rental docks
- Wake or no wake lake or river
- Boat rental
- Proximity of non-contiguous public lands for recreation
- Size of contiguous acres within same park
- Event or wedding facility in the same park (how many people and what amenities)

E. Regional Amenities

- Population size of specific county or contiguous counties
- In-county, out-of-county, and out-of-state park visitors and cabin renters

F. Internal and External Furnishings

- Full-sized refrigerator and stove vs. microwave and mini-frig
- Soft furnishing aesthetic (rustic north woods style, arts and crafts style, contemporary/suburban style)
- Soft furnishing quality (industrial, commercial, residential)
- Large screen TVs (number and what rooms)
- Wi-Fi
- Variety of pots, pans, dishes, silverware (new or used)
- Artwork
- Futon versus fold out or hide-a-bed couch
- Quality and materials of mattresses and/or box springs (vinyl or cloth)
- Game table
- Lounge chairs or hard wood chairs
- Curtains or blinds
- Length and construction of dining table and comfort of chairs
- Picnic table
- Porch wooden chairs and/or table

3. Operational and Policy Considerations

What is the impact of discrete operational considerations on revenue, expenses (staffing, upfront costs and maintenance), occupancy rates, and range of renters?

- Seasonality marketing initiatives
- Online vs. in-person/phone reservations (personal touch)
- Two-day minimum rental requirements; week minimum rental requirements
- Option for single day rentals
- Average occupancy rental period
- Percentage of year-over-year repeat rentals
- Percentage of “related” multi-cabin rentals by family or group
- Size and form (check or credit card) of damage deposit (versus small claims and/or complaint)
- Impact of discounts or coupons on off season, early reservation, or multi-year rentals
- Quality and frequency of cleaning by staff or renters
- Frequency of contact with the park ranger

- Garbage collection and bins (how big, where, what design)
- Ash trays in outside public spaces (porch, patio)
- Linen service
- Firewood available for sale
- Policy on pets inside or outside
- Smoking allowed inside or outside
- Allow holiday decorations
- Price range diversity within cabin grouping or park
- Park staff doing standard maintenance
- Outside contractors or park staff doing major maintenance and/or cabin construction