



## **Chapter 3: Livability & Recreation**

# Livability & Recreation Vision

A THRIVING COMMUNITY THAT BUILDS UPON ITS RICH FOUNDATION OF AGRICULTURE, WHILE ALSO PROVIDING A HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE THROUGH ITS FAMILY-FRIENDLY OPEN SPACE AND PASSIVE RECREATION OPTIONS, IN ADDITION TO A VARIETY OF PUBLIC SPACES FOR RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING AND COMMUNITY EVENTS.

## Introduction

Livability is a combination of two overarching ideas: how desirable is the county to live in now and how appealing is it for future residents. The only way to accurately calculate the livability of Boone County is through an analysis of several different topics: health, housing, safety, transportation, culture, economics, education, location, and the environment. Collectively those components demonstrate the attractiveness of the area in relation to other communities. Each one of those topics will be described in further detail within this plan, along with how they connect and overlap with other topics. This section specifically explores the recreational and cultural aspects of Boone County.

Recreational opportunities, availability, and relative proximity are substantial aspects of an area's overall livability and resident's quality of life. Because of this, the idea of Boone County being highly livable now or in the future is impossible to achieve without high quality recreational options playing an integral role. Recreation encompasses the vast inventory and network of parks, trails, open space, cultural events, and tourism destinations that contribute to a high quality of life for county residents.

## Recreational Assets

There are two key agencies in Boone County that are centered around recreation; the Boone County Conservation District and the Belvidere Park District. Between the two agencies, they operate and maintain over 30 miles of multi-use path and trail network,<sup>1</sup> 3,300 acres of parks and open space, and organize/host over 70 combined events, activities, camps, leagues, and programs each year.<sup>2</sup> The Park District also operates the William Grady Aquatic Center, Prairie Fields Sports Park, the Historic Baltic Mill, Riverside Ice Arena, and the Rivers Edge Recreation Center. Combined, most of these recreational opportunities are located in or around the City of Belvidere, but there are also a collection of open spaces and trails scattered throughout the county.

Public art and historic preservation has continued to be a priority of the community. The Boone County Arts Council and Historical Museum play key roles in preserving the community's history, but also creating a more esthetically pleasing environment for residents and visitors. The majority of public art installations, historical elements, and the historical museum itself are located in Belvidere, but residents of the entire county view the programs, initiatives, and projects of these two organizations as a strength of the county at-large.

At a regional level, the largest operator of parks and open space is the Rockford Park District (RPD) with a total of 127 different parks<sup>3</sup> and 1,561 acres of natural areas<sup>4</sup> in Winnebago County. The district's coverage area also extends into Boone County via the City of Loves Park's eastern most municipal border. As an agency, RPD prioritized building new large-scale regionally-significant indoor and outdoor recreational facilities over the past 20 years; UW Health Sports Factory, Mercyhealth Sportscore, and Sportscore 2. These facilities combined to draw 2,884,713 visitors<sup>5</sup> to

FIGURE 3.1 RECREATIONAL ASSETS



**30+**  
**MILES**  
OF SHARED USE  
PATHS

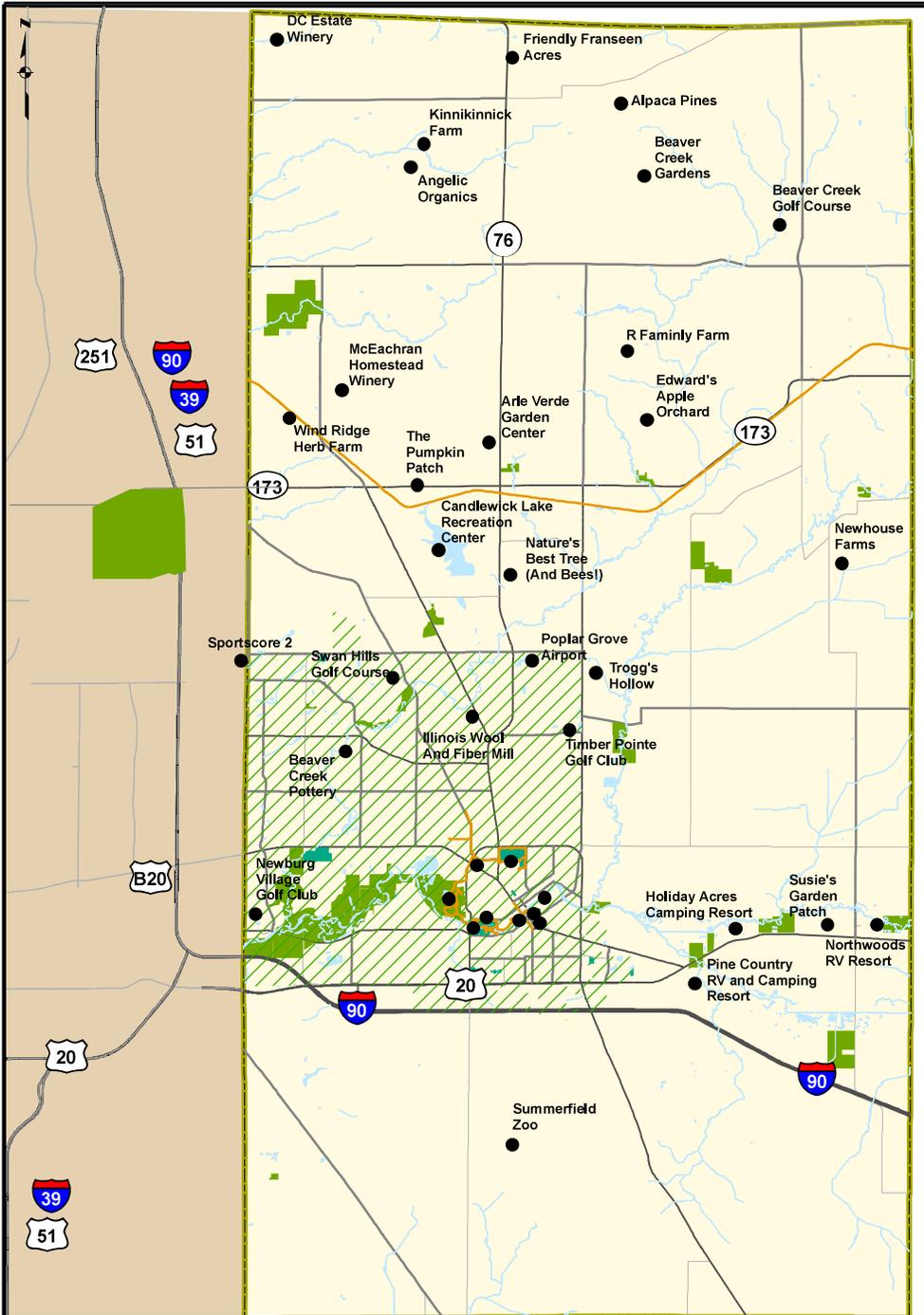


**2,500+**  
**ACRES**  
OF PARKS &  
OPEN SPACE



**70+**  
**ANNUALLY**  
OF EVENTS, CAMPS,  
ACTIVITIES, &  
PROGRAMS

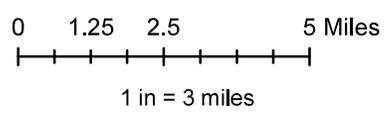
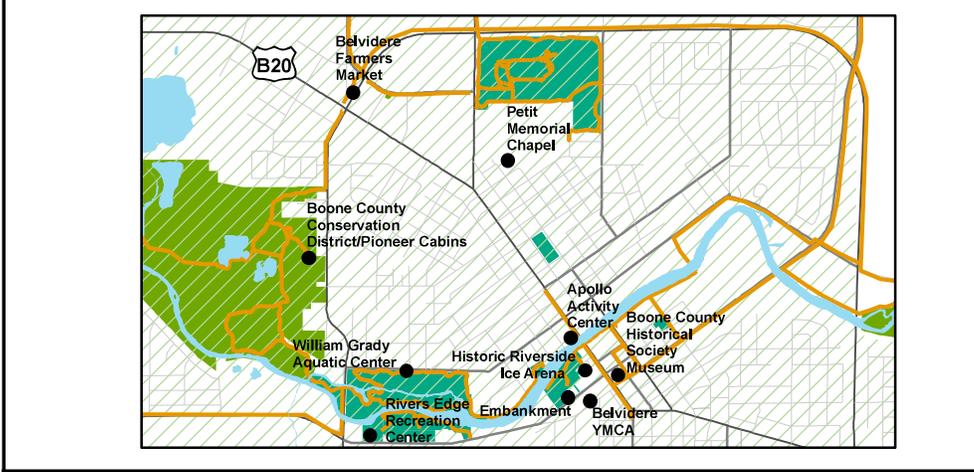




**FIGURE 3.2**  
**RECREATIONAL AND TOURISM ASSETS**

**KEY**

- Recreational and Tourism Assets
- Multi-Use Trails
- Rock Cut State Park
- ▨ Belvidere Park District Boundary
- Public Conservation Land
- Parks/Open Space
- Water
- Boone County
- Winnebago



Source Boone County GIS Department, 2019, Region 1 Planning Council, 2018.

the region from all over the Midwest in 2015. In 2017, an expansion was completed at Mercyhealth Sportscore 2 in Loves Park along Boone County's eastern border. It is an important recreational and potential tourism asset for Boone County.

Another significant regional recreational asset is Rock Cut State Park, also located in Loves Park. The park spans 3,092 acres with two lakes, a multitude of recreational trails, and a 270 site campground.<sup>6</sup> Rock Cut State Park drew 1,095,539 visitors from all over northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin in 2015.<sup>7</sup> It is an outdoor recreational oasis within the region.

Additional public and private recreational assets in Boone County include: public golf courses, campgrounds, YMCA, Boone County Community Building, Village of Poplar Grove municipal parks, Candlewick Lake, Kishwaukee River, and winter recreational trails.

## Tourism

A driving force in the Boone County economy is tourism. There are several key organizations that play a role in attracting visitors; The Grange, Belvidere Chamber of Commerce, Growth Dimensions, University of Illinois-Extension, and several of the local agri-tourism businesses. Together these organizations helped bring hundreds of thousands of visitors and nearly \$20 million dollars to the county in 2015.<sup>8</sup> Tourism, especially centered around agriculture, is widely recognized as a central piece to a sustainable economic future for Boone County. Over the last decade, agri-tourism businesses have increased in size and popularity, drawing people from all over the region and state. There have even been new events created that highlight the work of these specific businesses, such as the Boone County Farm Stroll hosted by the University of Illinois – Extension. While some agri-tourism businesses have generated more popularity recently, the local event of the year in Boone County is still the Boone County Fair held each August. The fair is one of the few in Illinois that still centers around agriculture including farm equipment, crops, and animals. It draws nearly 200,000 visitors annually, making it the most well attended county fair of the 104 that take place each year in Illinois.<sup>9</sup>

An event that blends many of the elements of livability and recreation with tourism, is a community-driven farmer's market. In Boone County, there is currently one seasonal and one annual farmer's market that takes place. Between May and October, in a parking lot along North State Street in Belvidere, there is a local farmer's market held each Saturday morning. It is small in size, but has had consistent customers, participants, and farmers for many years. On an annual basis, the Boone County Health Department hosts a Farmers Market and Wellness Fair in the county's parking lot. This event highlights different programs, encourages nutrition, and engages the community. Overall, residents recognized throughout the public participation phase that a perfect way to showcase the county's agricultural resources, attract visitors, and engage a wide range of demographics is through the expansion and marketing of farmer's markets.

FIGURE 3.3 TOURISM BY THE NUMBERS



# Community Culture

Boone County is steeped in a rich history of agriculture and rural heritage. Most residents of the county identify this as one of the reasons they choose to live here, and it is also widely regarded as being one of the most important elements of the county to protect moving forward. Previous plans have highlighted the notion of rural culture and protecting it for current and future residents. The same could be said today. However, it was also acknowledged that adapting and being open to change will be required over the next 10 years in order to allow the county to maintain, push forward, and prosper. Rural culture and remembering the county’s history and roots are still very important to the people of Boone County, but residents know that a healthy balance of new ideas coupled with tradition is necessary moving forward.

This balance is no more evident than in the form of shifting demographics and urbanization taking place over the past 20 years. County residents overall are older and increasingly more diverse than they were in 2000. In addition, the population increase has correlated with an increase in the amount of land that has been taken out of agricultural uses and developed into more urbanized uses. Recognizing and embracing cultural changes and shifts, in addition to continued growth of jobs and homes are important in preparing for the future. The key to a flourishing future for Boone County is striking a sufficient balance between protecting and conserving land and history, with future growth opportunities, and population needs.

*Throughout the public participation process the most common theme discussed was the rural culture of Boone County.*



# Livability and Recreation Goals, Objectives, & Strategies

**Goal 3.1 Continue Boone County’s legacy as a family-oriented community that strikes the appropriate balance between preserving the established rural culture and adapting to the desires of an urban lifestyle.**

## OBJECTIVES

a. Preserve the existing rural character and improve the overall perception of the county.

b. Cultivate new public recreational resources and awareness.

c. Develop more county-wide events that provide activities for all ages.

d. More effectively market the county’s tourism and recreational assets.

## STRATEGIES

Improve maintenance of existing public and open space.

Leverage the agricultural assets of the area in developing a reoccurring farmer’s market that showcases Boone County’s resources.

Create more county recreational facilities.

Seek new funding options for the Boone County Conservation District to expand its activities, assets, and programs.

Develop new multi-use trail connections within the county and region.

Leverage Boone County’s proximity to regional sports and recreation facilities such as Sportscore 2.

Partner with public organizations.

Increase collaboration of various recreational groups, schools, and government entities that organize and plan events.

Organize new events that are attractive for seniors, young adults, and children.

Increase the number of international and culturally inclusive events.

Incorporate both active and passive recreation options into the development of new events and activities.

Market snowmobiling and other winter outdoor activities in the northern part of the county.

Leverage the success of the existing agritourism establishments to increase visitors and foster development of new agritourism destinations.

Market the multi-use trail system to increase visitors.

Increase young people’s awareness of existing recreational opportunities.



# Chapter 3 Sources

## Text

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