

## **Backcountry Trail Unique Model for Iowa Tourism**

Coon Rapids, IA (October 1, 2013) A huge new Iowa nature preserve is poised to build a world-class mountain-bike and horse trail just 70 miles northwest of Des Moines.

Many Iowa counties and state parks maintain hard-surface bike trails or park paths. However, Iowa currently has very few long dirt trail networks tailored for the increasingly popular sport of mountain-biking. Of the 100 best mountain-bike trails ranked by the International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA) website, not a single one is in Iowa. This lack will soon be remedied.

The proposed new Whiterock Backcountry Trail will be a 35-mile soft-surface trail winding throughout a large new prairie and oak savanna restoration area along the Middle Raccoon River. The entire network will be open to walkers and runners. Over 16 miles will be single-track trail designed especially for mountain-bikers, and 6.3 miles will be single track tailored for horses. Another 12 miles of double-track trail will be open to all users, including low-powered carts serving the mobility impaired.

This backcountry trail will represent an important recreational option for outdoor enthusiasts from the Des Moines, Ames, and Omaha metro areas. From Des Moines, the trail will be located just 70 miles northwest along Highway 141; from Omaha the trail will lie 100 miles east.

The backcountry trail will be built and maintained by the private seven-square-mile Whiterock Conservancy land trust. Construction costs will be covered by a combination of federal grants, city and county contributions, private donations, and possibly state funding. Whiterock requested the last \$400,000 in construction costs from the Vision Iowa Community Attractions and Tourism (CAT) program on Sept 17. If approved, construction will begin next year. In a state with the nation's second lowest percentage of lands open for public recreation, the nonprofit Whiterock Conservancy land trust represents an innovative partnership model to increase Iowa's outdoor recreation services with almost no municipal, county or state outlay.

## **Unique Trail Experience**

The seven-square-mile Whiterock Conservancy land trust is a private outdoor nature area founded in 2004 and located upriver from Des Moines. In a state characterized by monoculture, Whiterock has a unique three-part nonprofit mission of "multipurpose land use." The goal is to combine sustainable agriculture and grazing, environmental restoration, and low-impact public use --all on one gorgeous 5,000-acre landscape.

As part of its mission to engage the public with the landscape, the nonprofit Whiterock already hosts free and low-cost outdoor events, and rents canoes and event space. It also rents campsites and accommodations, including at the historic Garst Farm that once hosted Khrushchev.

In addition, Whiterock shares public art initiatives --and a local 10-mile hard-surface trail system--with the small town of Coon Rapids and Carroll County Riverside Park.

Now, after years of planning and preparation, this emerging land trust is ready to extend the local trail system deep into the heart of its huge landscape by adding 35 miles of sustainable backcountry trails.

Whiterock's current trail network is cobbled together from eroding deer paths and abandoned farm roads. The new trail system will be soft (dirt) surface, but will follow the state-of-the-art trail design and construction principles of the International Mountain Bike Association. The carving of new trails along the contours of dozens of river valley ridges, employing frequent grade changes and precise outslowing, will create a special trail experience that maximizes the enjoyment of trail users, minimizes erosion and sediment load in the Middle Raccoon River.

The newly designed and engineered trail will wind dozens of miles through one of the most beautiful and diverse landscapes in Iowa. Since large portions of the trail are being planned from scratch, it will be routed to numerous points of scenic, archeological, geological or environmental interest such as Whiterock's prohibition-era dance barn, riverside bluffs, prairie remnants, ancient oaks, sustainable agriculture demonstration sites, and various wildlife-viewing stands. One portion will be built as a boardwalk along a gorgeous wetland seep, filled with unusual native plants.

Whiterock's backcountry trail will provide an important in-state option for the state's increasing number of mountain-bike enthusiasts. Currently, 7 % of the Iowa's population engages in mountain-biking and the state has several active mountain-biking clubs. However, at the present time Iowa's serious off-road bikers must travel to Minnesota, Wisconsin or Michigan to find larger specially-engineered single- or double-track trails tailored to their sport. The closest comparable trail would be the Cuyuna Lakes Mountain Bike Trail in Ironton, MN, 407 miles to the north.

The Whiterock project will help keep those recreation dollars in-state. Once the new trail is completed, it will easily serve over 10,000 mountain-bikers a year.

Horseback riders will also find at Whiterock a backcountry trail experience that rivals that of the best state parks. To protect the trail from erosion, all stream crossings will be armored, and segments of the trail open to horses will be undergirded with rock.

Walkers, hikers and marathoners will find a huge landscape to explore. The mobility-impaired, including the elderly and families with small children, will have the option of renting low-powered carts. Whiterock's goal is to allow all types of users to be able to appreciate its surprisingly wild and remote landscape.

Taking all users together, based on figures from comparable parks and trail systems, Whiterock's backcountry trail will soon be serving well over 25,000 users a year. These rural-tourism dollars will bring a significant economic boost to local convenience stores, gas stations, lodgings and restaurants in Coon Rapids, Bayard, Carroll, Guthrie Center, and Perry.

## **Fundraising Almost Complete**

Planning and fundraising for the trail is well underway. All archeological and environmental permits have already been secured, the route is staked out, pre-construction scientific work (including plant and water flow surveys) are complete, and the construction supervision contractor selected.

Construction costs for soft trails are only about one-fifth the cost of paved trails, so this 35-mile soft-surfaced trail has a total construction budget of only \$1,560,000. Together with \$2.7 million in land donations made since 2008, and \$400,000 in associated non-infrastructure costs (such as marketing, trail-impact monitoring, and the maintenance fund), the total project cost is \$4.2 million.

Fundraising is now in the homestretch. Whiterock has already secured \$1.2 million in construction monies, including a \$474,200 Federal Recreational Trails grant and a \$355,680 Transportation Enhancement Grant. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which holds a seat on the Whiterock board, is public sponsor for the federal grants.

Private donations, and pledges of local public support, have now brought fundraising within striking distance of being completed. Only \$800,000 more needs to be raised. And as soon as half of that (\$400,000) is secured, trail construction can begin.

On September 11, Whiterock requested \$418,000 from the Vision Iowa Community Attractions and Tourism (CAT) Board, which likes to be the “the last dollars in.” The amount requested represents less than 10% of the total \$4.2 million project cost. If approved, this state funding would allow Whiterock to begin trail construction next year, and hold its grand opening in 2015.

## **Whiterock Product of Huge Land Gift**

Iowa has the second lowest percentage of public lands in the United States. When cattle-rancher, farmer, and outdoorsman Steve Garst died in 2004, his widow, five daughters, and sister decided to take steps to protect and preserve the historic Garst Farm and also 5,000 acres of his scenic river valley landholdings.

However, rather than donating the land to the county or state, the seven Garst women chose a different model. They asked the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) to help set up a private non-profit land trust to receive the donation. This is one of the largest land gifts ever made in Iowa. Only one state park in Iowa is larger than the Whiterock landscape.

The new organization was named Whiterock Conservancy after the local name for an ancient light-colored bluff along the river.

The nonprofit Whiterock Conservancy is led by a 9-member board of directors controlled by representatives of the INHF, the Iowa DNR, and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. Land gifting is still underway, but when all Garst land donations are

complete, Whiterock Conservancy will own over 5,000 acres stretching eight miles along both banks of the Middle Raccoon River valley, including over 1,000 acres of rare prairie and oak savanna remnants.

To date, the Garsts have transferred to Whiterock ownership the Garst Farm and a little more than half the pledged land. Much of the donated land has grazing or crop production value which helps support the new non-profit, which also raises funds from private donations, grants and tourism services. The recent hire of Conrad Kramer, a professional land trust director, is now allowing the fledgling Whiterock organization to come into its own.

### **Public Benefit**

The existence of the private Whiterock land trust benefits Iowa in numerous ways. Besides protecting and restoring scarce habitat for native species, and using and demonstrating best-practice agricultural production methods that help preserve soil health and water quality, Whiterock Conservancy also provides free and low-cost recreation for locals and visitors alike.

Local economic benefits are realized through county property-tax payments and visitor spending. Whiterock can also assist with area business attraction by offering quality outdoor recreation that workers otherwise might seek in other states. Of course it also has its own employees.

Conrad Kramer, an experienced land trust executive, recently moved to Coon Rapids from California to assume the position of Whiterock Conservancy's Executive Director. "I was attracted to Iowa by Whiterock's unique mission of a multipurpose landscape," reports Kramer. "Most land trusts simply seek to protect land from development. Whiterock goes far beyond that in seeking the creative intersection of sustainable agriculture; environmental restoration; and public engagement with the landscape through outdoor education and recreation."

"Because Whiterock is a non-profit, we have a lot of freedom to be creative, and especially to layer activities on the same piece of land. Our mountain-bike trail, for example, will cross prairie-pastures where we practice sustainable grazing, monitor bird populations, and host astronomers attracted by our dark skies and excellent stargazing. Once our new trail is complete, for the outdoor enthusiast there will be no other Iowa backcountry trail experience that even comes close."

For more information go to [www.whiterockconservancy.org](http://www.whiterockconservancy.org) or contact:

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