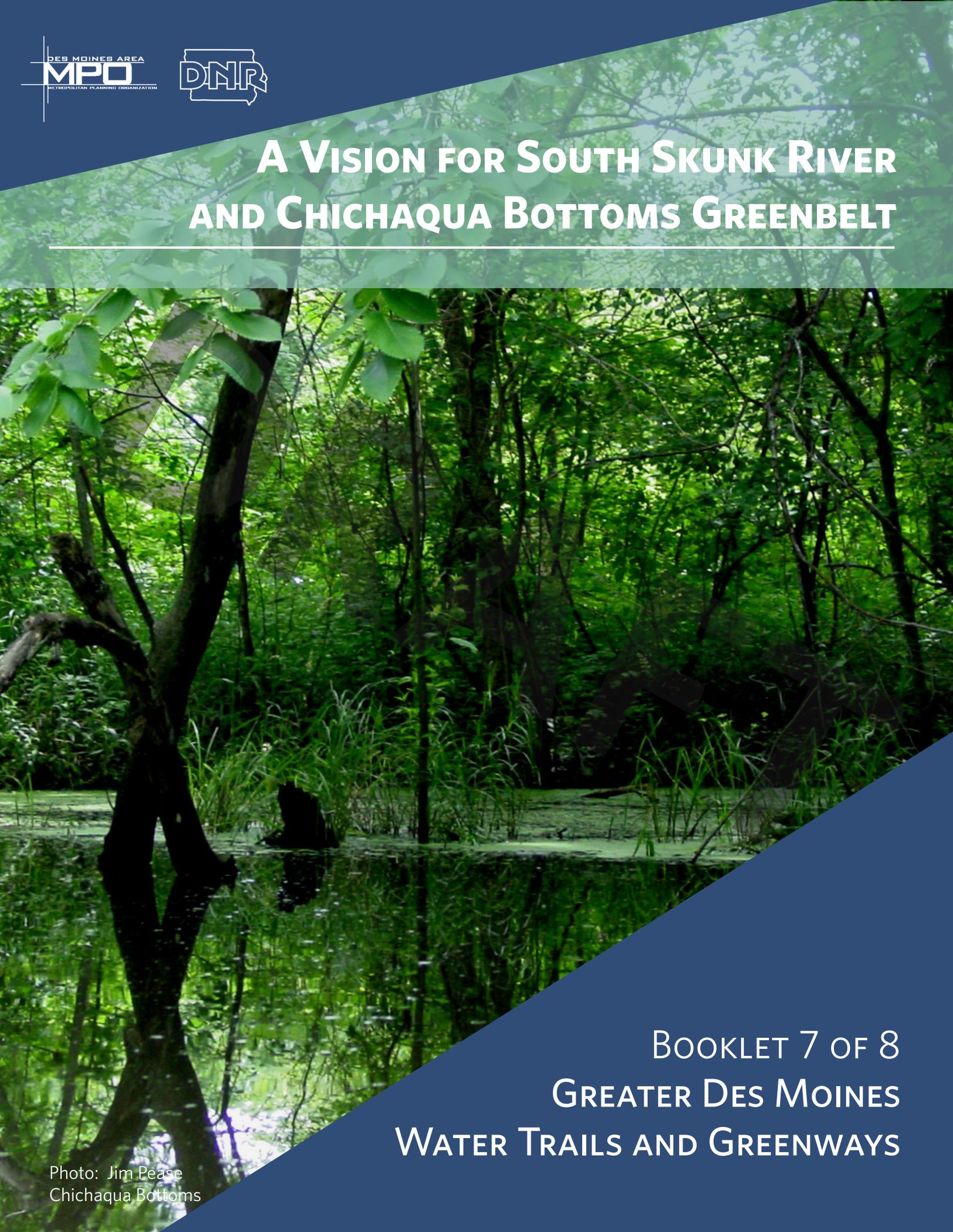




A VISION FOR SOUTH SKUNK RIVER AND CHICHAQUA BOTTOMS GREENBELT



BOOKLET 7 OF 8
GREATER DES MOINES
WATER TRAILS AND GREENWAYS

Photo: Jim Pease
Chichaqua Bottoms

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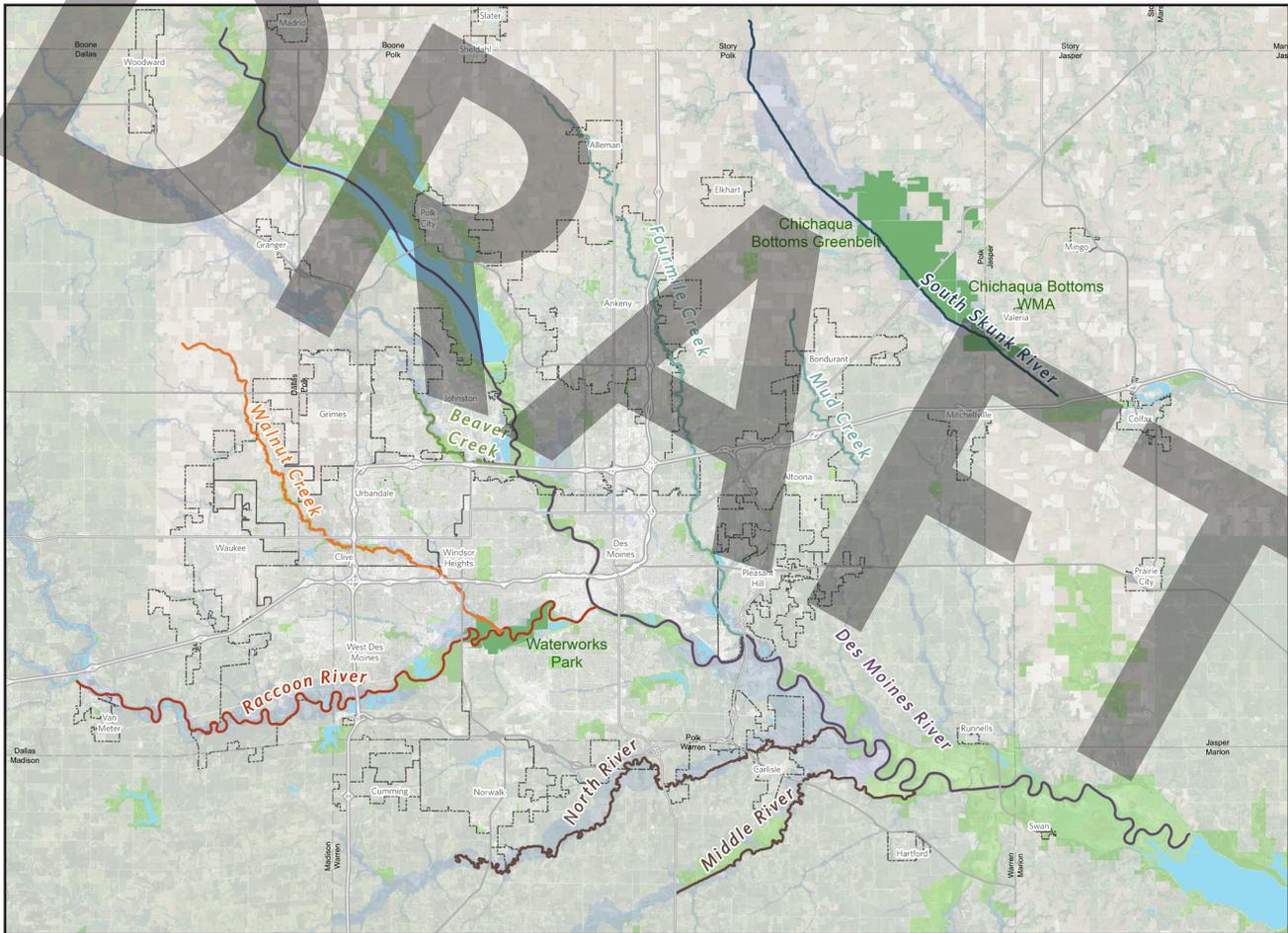
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One Vision, Many Communities

The Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Plan establishes a regional vision for our rivers, creeks, and greenways. Through extensive community engagement and with the help of a strong steering committee, a clear regional vision emerged.

Regional Vision

The water trails and greenways of Greater Des Moines will be a natural haven, healthy ecosystem, signature recreational destination, economic driver, and community focal point that welcome people of all ages, abilities, interests, incomes, and cultures to connect with their rivers, creeks, and greenways.



Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways planning area

This Booklet

The Greater Des Moines Water Trails and Greenways Plan looks at more than 150 miles of water ways. This booklet provides an overview of South Skunk River and the Chichaqua Greenbelt, including recommendations to improve its environmental, recreational, and economic potential for the entire community. There are companion booklets for each waterway, as well as a strategies and policies booklet.

Recommendations

Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt is a rare, wild gem near the metro, the largest preserve of its kind in the region. It is 9,100 acres of a mostly continuous public land primarily owned by the Polk County Conservation Board. Chichaqua offers paddlers unparalleled wildlife viewing. The Skunk River is mostly a non-meandering stream, straightened to support its agricultural neighbors.

Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt

This area provides a unique paddling experience unlike anything else in the state. The wildness along the oxbows in the greenbelt provides high quality wildlife viewing. During average water levels, about two miles of out-and-back paddling are available in the old Skunk River oxbows located north of the current park headquarters. The lack of water current and relatively shallow depth mean that this is family-friendly and appropriate for novice paddlers. The current carry-down boat put-in and take-out are at the same place, so the paddle can be shortened or lengthened as the water level allows and paddler desires vary. This also makes car shuttling unnecessary. The park offers many existing amenities that can be capitalized upon for expanded programming and use of the park, including electric camp sites, flush bathrooms, a shower house, foot trails, shelters for events and programs, and a small livery.

It is recommended that the Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Master Plan be implemented. Additionally, proposed improvements could include:

- Install wayfinding signage within the oxbows
- Add platform or adventure camping within a “wild” feeling area of the greenbelt
- Expansion of foot and bike trails
- Expansion of environmental education facilities.



Skunk River

The Skunk River is a channelized ditch. The river offers an easy, yet uninteresting, paddle. The banks tend to be steep (nearly universally at about 45 degrees) and 4-5 feet high. Excluding Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt, the land is privately owned. Without negatively impacting upstream landowners, it is recommended to seek opportunities to restore the flow of water through historic Skunk River meanders and oxbows.



Relevant Links:

[Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Master Plan](#)

[State of the Rivers Report](#)

Quick Facts:

18 miles in area

27% floodplain preserved

Polk County

Key Projects

Project	Location	Jurisdiction	Key Amenities	Considerations
Camping	Chichaqua Bottoms	Polk County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Platform camping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear wayfinding and info on etiquette and usage
Carry-down Access	Ditch 52 and 118th St	Polk County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wayfinding Small-scale parking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This completes a programming loop for short trips down the South Skunk from the access further north
Soft Trails	Throughout Chichaqua Bottoms	Polk County	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpretive signage for birding Wayfinding Restrooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain natural character

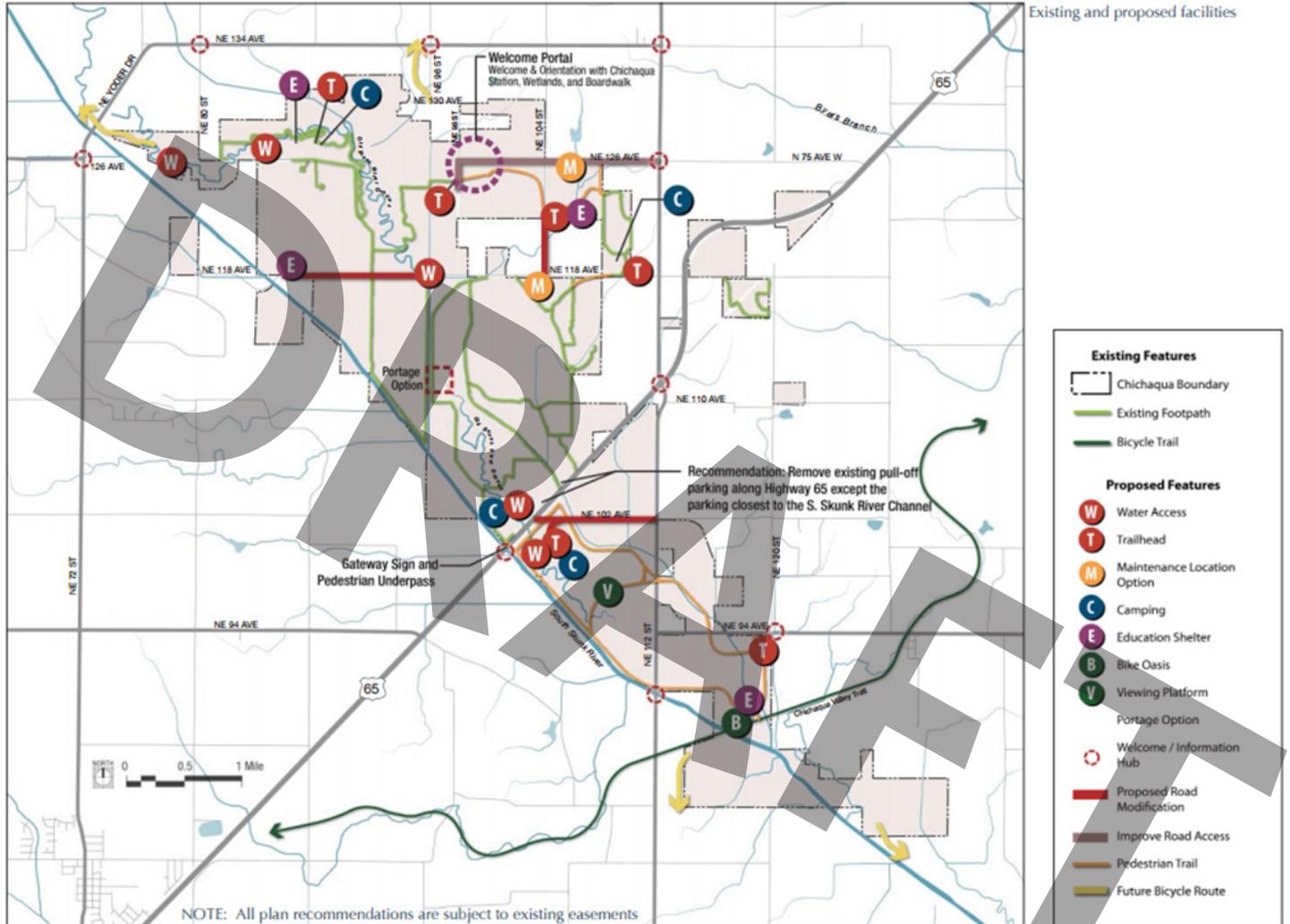
**Additional initiatives can be found in the Policies and Practices Booklet*



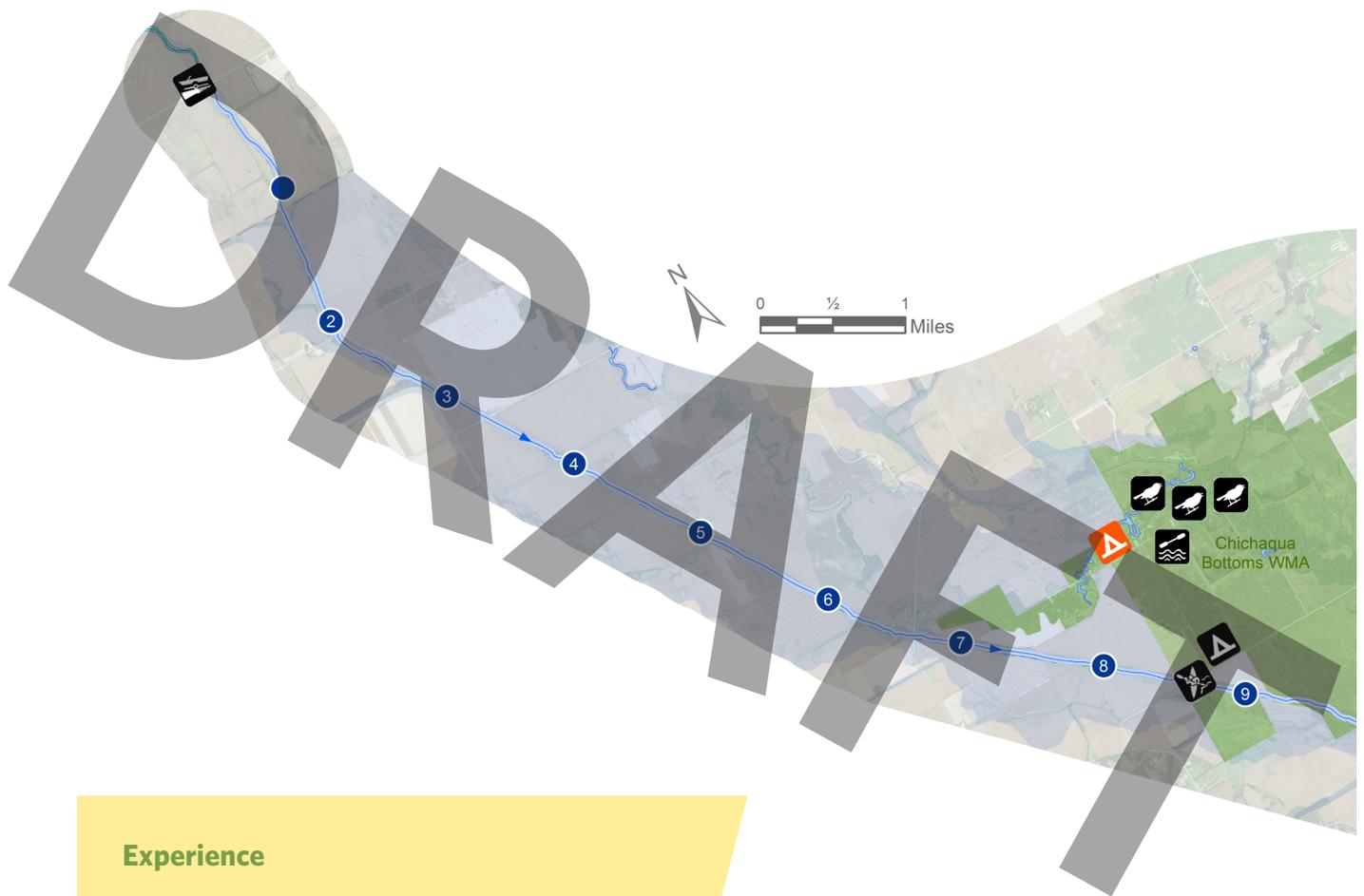
Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt Master Plan

Polk County Conservation

OVERVIEW OF PROPOSED FACILITIES RECOMMENDATIONS



South Skunk River & Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt

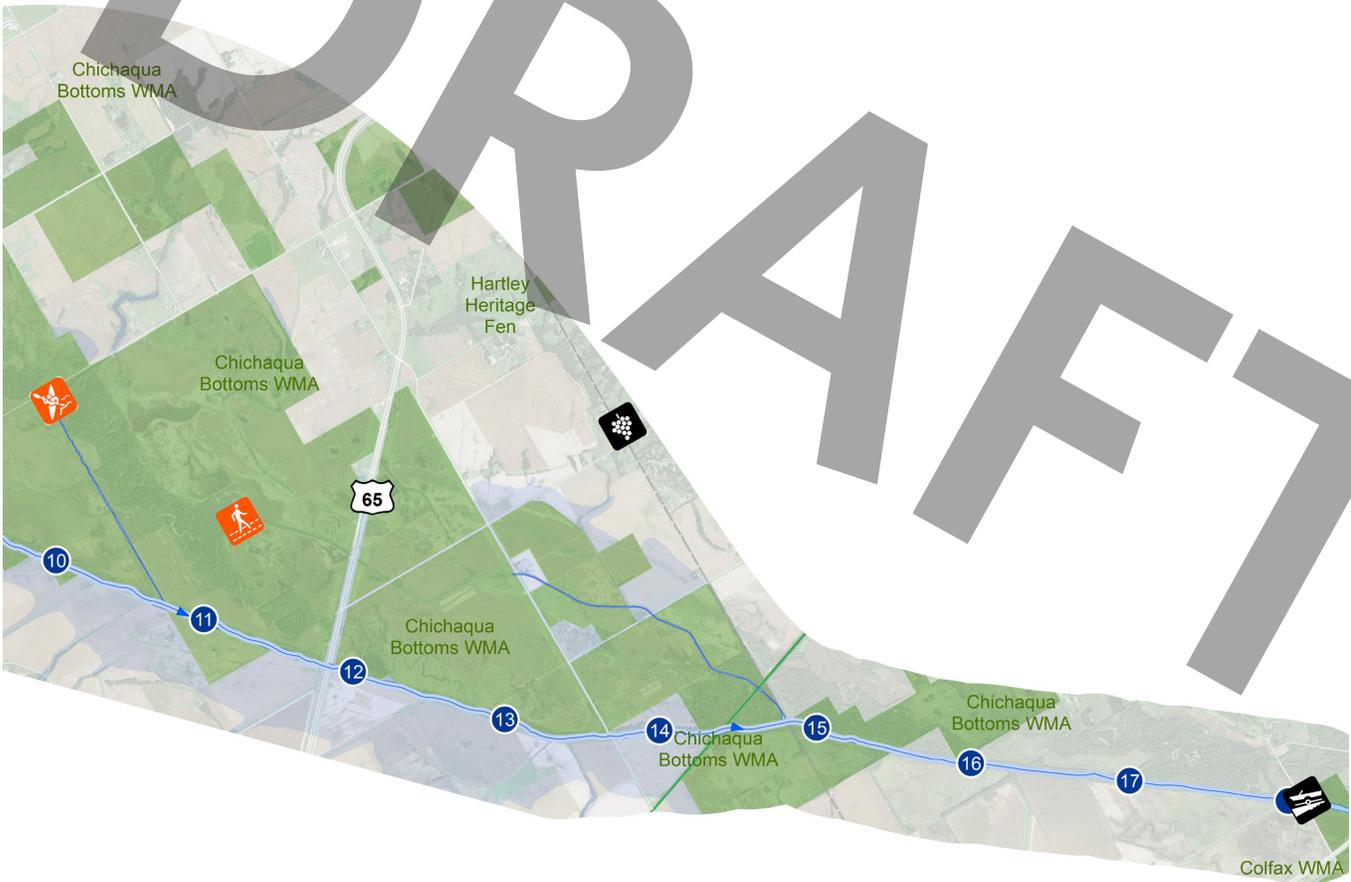


Experience

The South Skunk River is generally an easy paddle, but one must be wary of the water levels as it can become dangerous quickly. The river has high, steep banks that can detract from the experience and make the river much flashier following any rain event.

Chichaqua Bottoms is a whole different experience surrounded by wildlife and nature. The backwaters offer a peaceful experience, though finding your way around can be difficult.

Color Codes	Potential Hubs	Other Icons
Existing	Economic Hub	Mile Marker
Potential	Activity Hub	South Skunk River
Modifications		County Boundary
Amenities		Conservation and Park Land (Public)
Carry-down Access	Restrooms	Floodplain
Boating Access	Vineyard	Bicycle/Pedestrian Facilities
Camping	Livery	Existing
Birding	Conservation Area	Future
Parking		



Symbology Explained

Carry-down Access



Carry-down accesses are for non-motorized paddling such as kayaking, tubing, or canoeing. Site design involves many factors, and should first look at the Iowa DNR's *Developing Water Trails in Iowa* guidelines. Lesser accesses are denoted by the portage symbol, and may not require the same level of infrastructure or amenities.

- Lighting and trash cans
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Launch types
- Watercraft and bicycle lockers
- Interpretive and wayfinding signage



Wading Access



Wading spaces are where we can get our feet wet. They can be designed for mucking among natural vegetation and sandbars or as play spaces with steps and stones. No matter the design, wading areas allow us the opportunity to physically connect to the water and nature.

- All ages access
- Restrooms/showers
- Benches and resting points in view of access



Fishing



Fishing is a popular activity all along the creeks and rivers. Creating access points can provide safe and comfortable areas that support anglers. Rock outcroppings, docks, and other designs offer different experiences. Universal design is critical since fishing is often a multi-generational activity.

- Restrooms
- Lights and trash cans
- Spaces for relaxing
- All-ages/abilities design
- Parking and bicycle parking



Respite



Areas to relax, take in the view, and enjoy the river allow people to find a moment of respite in the metro. These areas can be natural greenspaces or more urban like the Principal Riverwalk depending on the context of the area and desire of the community.

- Benches with a view
- Picnic areas and tables
- Paths and trails along water



Economic Hub

Water trails can play a role in developing economic hubs. These hubs typically represent the convergence of multiple assets, such as a river, trails, residential and economic clustering, and other factors. These are destinations that draw in visitors for multiple reasons. The scale changes for smaller or rural communities, but the economic impacts remain. These hubs are opportunities for supportive development along the rivers.

- Event spaces
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Launch types
- Bicycle parking
- Public art
- Restaurants and shops
- Liveries/outfitters
- Shuttle service



Activity Hub

Activity hubs leverage existing attractions into destinations where multiple activities converge. These hubs take advantage of nearby parks and trails to create spaces for longer visits and multiple activities. Often multi-generational and family-friendly spaces, these hubs should be planned with a diverse audience in mind and combine several different reasons to visit.

- Play spaces
- Educational opportunities
- Areas to eat, relax and play
- Programming
- Restrooms and trash cans
- Lights
- Bicycle parking
- Wayfinding



Conservation Area

A key component to fully enjoying the rivers and creeks is ensuring their natural quality and sustainability over time. Creating connected spaces for habitats, restoring wetlands and reducing flooding, and educating the next generation of river stewards are central pieces to the long-term health of the waterways.

- Educational programming
- Interpretive signage
- Habitat connectivity
- Wetlands restoration
- Floodplain management



Soft Trails

Unpaved walking, hiking, and birding trails give people access to nature and offer a much different experience than paved trails. They also do not disrupt wildlife connections and can provide the opportunity for education programming.

- Educational programming
- Interpretive signage for history or birding
- Maintenance and conservation



DRAFT

South Skunk River

A DAY IN 2025

IMAGINE FINDING YOURSELF AMONG THE NEARLY 10 MILES OF QUIET BACKWATERS OF THE CHICHAQUA BOTTOMS GREENWAY. ONLY A SHORT DRIVE AWAY FROM THE METRO, THE GREENBELT PRESERVES THE OLD OXBOWS OF THE SKUNK RIVER, OFFERING PADDLERS A RICH NATURAL DIVERSITY. YOU PADDLE ALONG THE QUIET WATERS, SEEING KINGFISHERS DIVE FOR FISH, SOFT-SHELLED TURTLES BASKING ON MUD BARS, AND BEAVERS HARVEST GIANT RAGWEED. YOU PADDLE FOR HOURS WITHOUT SIGN OF CIVILIZATION, AND YOU KNOW YOU WOULD HAVE ALMOST GOTTEN LOST BUT FOR THE WAYFINDING SIGNAGE KEEPING YOU ON COURSE.