

Keep Public Lands in Public Hands

Increasingly local governments are approached to sell or give public lands to private developers so they can build housing, office parks, and business buildings. Additionally those same governments are approached to sell trees or to provide land for detention basins. The result is the publicly-owned green space – parks, natural areas, and recreation areas are being lost.

The chapter challenges the privatization of urban parks and green spaces. Parks and recreation areas provide significant benefits to the community. Iowa's natural areas

- Are habitat for wild plants and animals
- Provide recreation opportunities for hiking, camping, canoeing, viewing wildlife
- Cleanse the air, retain and absorb water, sequester carbon
- Provide relaxation, stress relief and satisfies spiritual needs
- Provide beautiful scenery
- Provide economic benefits to the neighboring communities when visitors spend money for things such as hotels, gas, restaurants.
- Provide jobs and careers to people who work in parks and recreation, both in the public and private sector
- Preserve places where children can learn about nature, can play safely, and can enjoy being outdoors.



Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor

Public parks, natural areas, recreation areas are not land banks waiting for the next developer to build housing and businesses. Likewise, outstanding natural areas need to be protected instead of destroyed.

Some examples serve to illustrate the problem where public land was under threat:

- In Marion, one developer was able to acquire sections of Thomas Park on two separate occasions to build condominiums, offices, and retail buildings. On the second occasion, the developer succeeded in trading his low-lying land that will be used for a storm water detention basin in return for the developer being given park property. A disc golf course had to be relocated to accommodate the land transfer. On the last occasion, scores of citizens signed a petition protesting the transfer and the council chambers were packed with citizens who did not want to lose their park.
- Cedar Rapids has been under siege from developers who want to use public parks for development. A developer wanted to take a portion of Twin Pines Golf Course for upscale retail, a project that was later abandoned. Four acres of the Sac and Fox hiking and biking trail were sold to a developer so he could better configure his housing development. Riverside Park, a 120-year-old park, was sold to Penick & Ford, a local industry, so that they could expand at some time in the future, and even though they had no current plans to expand.
- The Iowa Department of Transportation, at the behest of local development interests and the City of Cedar Rapids, constructed a four-lane highway through the Rock Island County

Preserve. The Linn County Conservation Board agreed to transfer the land to the DOT for construction of the highway despite protests from concerned residents. The Preserve was an area filled with threatened and endangered plants, the threatened Blandings turtle, and a large number of butterfly species.

- Over the years, both a zoo and an amusement park were proposed for Squaw Creek Park in Linn County. Opponents were able to keep that development out of the park.
- In January, 2020, a public outcry encouraged Webster City's council to turn down a proposal to sell over an acre of East Twin Park to a developer who wanted to build a Dollar General store.

Logging companies regularly are allowed to harvest trees from city and county parks. Once the trees have been removed, habitat for birds and other wildlife is destroyed, potentially introducing the area to weeds and erosion. Some examples where the trees in county parks are sold to logging companies include:

- Black Hawk County Supervisors included a line in their budget for revenue earned from the sale of logs from county parks.
- The Conservation Director for Washington County presented a plan to log Sockum Ridge County Park, removing 173 acres of timber from the 213 acre park. The alleged purpose of the logging was to encourage more wildflowers and growth of new trees.



Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor

What you can do

In order to protect your local parks,

- Determine who is responsible for the parks in your area.
 - The City Council is responsible for parks in cities and towns. The city may have a board or committee responsible for decisions related to the community parks. The day-to-day operations related to the parks will be performed by a department in the city.
 - The County Conservation Board is responsible for county parks. However, with respect to the sale of assets such as park land and trees, the County Board of Supervisors must approve the sale.
- Monitor the proceedings of the city council and the conservation board with respect to the parks.
- Advocate for protection of park land and trees.

Iowa ranks 49th in the country in the amount of public land owned by federal, state, and local governments, with slightly more than one percent of the land owned by state and federal governments.¹

By keeping public land in public hands, the parks and recreation areas can be enjoyed by everyone in the community as well as visitors to the community.

¹ Figures are from Natural Resources Council of Maine, as reported by Erin Jordan, "Public Land Buys at Risk", *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, April 28, 2019