

**AMERY TO DRESSER STATE RECREATION
TRAIL**

POLK COUNTY, WISCONSIN

**MASTER PLAN
OCTOBER, 2004**

Polk County Property, Forestry & Recreation Committee

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Introduction and Executive Summary

This Master Plan represents the strategy of Polk County as well as various trail advocates and user groups, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) for the development, operation, and maintenance of a 13.48 mile railroad corridor presently known as the Amery to Dresser Trail. The trail is located on a former Wisconsin Central Limited Railroad right-of-way which begins two miles east of Dresser and extends into the City of Amery, Wisconsin. Within the City of Amery, the corridor width ranges from 60 feet wide to 180 feet wide, whereas in the rural branch of the corridor, the trail width is consistently 100 feet wide. The trail consists of approximately 174 acres and generally runs in a west to east direction. Map 1 shows the regional location of the trail. Map 2 shows the location of the trail in Polk County.

The trail right-of-way was acquired from Wisconsin Central Limited in 2003 by the WDNR under the Stewardship Program. Subsequently, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) and the County of Polk (Appendix A). Under the terms of the MOU, the WDNR will grant a trail easement to Polk County as well as designate the trail as a "State Trail" under section NR 51.73, Wis. Adm. Code. The WDNR will also complete an environmental review of the property pursuant to s. 1.11, Stats., and Chapter NR 150, Wis. Adm. Code. In addition, the WDNR will work with Polk County to identify funding sources for the development and repair of the trail. Under this same MOU, Polk County will be responsible for the development, operation, repair, and maintenance of the trail.

The trail will have a dual surface to handle activities such as hiking, bicycling and horseback riding in the summer and snowmobile in the winter. ATV use to be all-season. Limited opportunities for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing may be available.

The trail will be developed in phases depending on trail usage and funding availability.

II. Goals and Objectives*

A. Goals:

- Provide and preserve a multi-use and multi-season recreation trail at least 13 miles in length stretching from Dresser to Amery. The all-season trail will have a dual surface to provide two-way traffic for ATV, bicycling, hiking and winter snowmobile use.

B. Objectives:

- To complement present economic benefits of trails existing in Polk County and provide opportunities for economic development not reflected in current trail usage.
- To provide recreational opportunities that complement present trail opportunities in Polk County and provide recreational opportunities that presently are underrepresented in the Polk County Trail system.
- To enhance opportunities for tourism in Polk County.
- To respect the wishes and investments of landowners and communities through which the trail passes.
- To provide for recreational opportunities that promotes the health and safety of the community.
- To preserve the rural character and environmental integrity of the trail.
- To anticipate the urbanization of the area through which the trail passes and provide for possible future use of the trail as an alternative transportation system between communities.
- To provide opportunities for the greatest number of projected uses of the trail consistent with the previous objectives.

*Two public hearings were held in Polk County (Appendix B) to assess the interested public's desired uses of the trail. The information gained from these public hearings, in combination with information and input from other sources, formed the basis for the proposed recreational trail use.

III. Proposed Management and Land Development

A. Land Acquisition and Ownership

- The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) acquired the rail grade right-of-way from the Wisconsin Central Limited by means of Stewardship funds. The WDNR has paid all costs to acquire the property and will maintain ownership of the entire right-of-way. Under the terms of the MOA, the WDNR will convey a non-exclusive easement to Polk County and other valuable consideration. The WDNR will not issue other easements that will adversely affect the use of the property for the intended trail purposes.
- Additional property may be acquired to support trail functions and unique ecosystems.

B. Uses of the Trail Corridor

Because the Amery to Dresser Trail is a multi-use, multi-season trail that provides recreational trail opportunities to as many different interests as possible, it has been determined that a continuous separate trail tread or dual trail be developed. Following is a discussion of the encouraged primary and secondary uses, allowed uses and the prohibited uses of the Amery to Dresser Trail.

1. Encouraged Primary Uses

- **ATV Use:** All-season. Utilizing a trail tread other than the bicycling/hiking trail tread.
- **Bicycling:** snow-free periods. Utilizing portions of the trail corridor other than the snowmobile/ATV trail tread.
- **Hiking:** Snow-free periods. Utilizing portions of the trail corridor other than the snowmobile/ATV trail tread.
- **Horseback Riding:** Utilizing a trail tread other than the bicycling/hiking trail tread.
- **Snowmobiling:** Snow-cover periods. Restricted to published trail use periods. Only groomed areas may be traveled.

2. Encouraged Secondary Uses

- **Cross-Country Skiing and Snowshoeing:** Utilizing portions of the trail corridor other than the snowmobile/ATV trail tread.
- **Jogging**
- **Study of natural and cultural features.**
- **Wildlife and bird watching**

3. Allowed Uses

- Pets: With restrictions including leashes, feces disposal and closed areas.
- Public Road Crossings: WDNR rules will govern this, and as landowner, WDNR will be the primary contact.
- Private Residential Crossings: WDNR rules will govern this, and as landowner, WDNR will be the primary contact.
- Private Farm and Recreation Crossings: WDNR rules will govern this, and as landowner, WDNR will be the primary contact.
- Other crossings: WDNR rules will govern this, and as landowner, WDNR will be the primary contact.
- Utilities: WDNR rules will govern this, and as landowner, WDNR will be the primary contact.

4. Prohibited Uses

- Motorized Vehicles: Other than snowmobiles operating as permitted during snow-cover periods and ATV's operating all-season, only administrative and maintenance vehicles, small electric carts used by disabled individuals during snow-free periods and vehicles on designated roadways and parking areas may operate within the trail corridor.
- Hunting and trapping.
- Camping: Within the trail corridor except in designated campsites.
- Private occupancy.
- Conducting Business, Promotions or Advertising: Within the trail corridor without the express consent of the Polk County Property, Forestry & Recreation Committee and the WDNR.

C. Development Program

The MOU specifies that the development of the trail is the responsibility of Polk County. The WDNR will grant an easement to Polk County for the development, maintenance and operation of the trail. It is understood that the WDNR will assist Polk County financially with trail development through available grant/ aid programs.

Under the terms of the MOU, Polk County will establish a recreational trail on the corridor within a period of five years from the WNDR date of property acquisition. Development of the trail will be managed by the Buildings, Solid Waste and Parks Department. The planned development will be phased to allow for orderly and financially affordable development.

In September 2002, Polk County contracted with Ayres Associates to conduct a Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) of the railroad corridor

(Appendix C). Further inspection of trail infrastructure, cost of improvements and a recommended phased-in development plan will be completed pending Polk County and WDNR agreements. It is estimated that local agreements can be finalized by November, 2004, when an addendum will be included with this report.

1. Initial Development
(To be determined after engineering analysis)
2. Long Term Development
(To be determined after engineering analysis)
3. Development Schedule

The initial development phase of the trail should be completed in 2005. Basic improvements and safety considerations should be in place so that the entire trail is open for use in early fall of 2005. Subsequent long-term development activities will occur as demand, opportunity and funding allow.

4. Development Standards

In accordance with the MOA, the trail will be developed in compliance with the WDNR Design Standards Handbook, Chapter 30 – Trails. WDNR “Bridge Guidelines for New and Replacement Structures – Snowmobile and All-Terrain Vehicle” (Publ-CA-005 89), WDNR “Snowmobile Trail Signing Handbook” (Publ-AA-023), and AASHTO “Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities” will also be followed. All structures placed in the WDNR Right-Of-Way will need prior WDNR approval.

Associated facilities, if any, will be designed and constructed in compliance with state and local building codes and the American’s With Disabilities Act.

D. Operation & Maintenance Program

Polk County will have the primary responsibility for the operation and maintenance of the trail in Polk County. The Buildings, Solid Waste and Park Department under the direction of the Property, Forestry & Recreation Committee will act as the primary agent of the County. It is the intent of Polk County to encourage the development of a “Friends” of the trail group to assist in planning and accomplishing the operation and maintenance of the trail.

Trail Operation

The daily operation of the trail will be directed by Chapters NR 45 (State Parks and State Forests), NR 50 (Administration of Outdoor Recreation Program Grants and State Aids), and NR 65 (All-Terrain Vehicles) of the Wis. Admin. Code. These codes will be supplemented by Polk County ordinances and park

directives. Daily operation is directed and performed by the Polk County Buildings, Solid Waste and Park Department and its contractors and cooperators. Daily routine enforcement is the responsibility of Polk County.

User fees will not exceed those established in s. 27.01, Stats., and will be subject to written approval by the WDNR. The standard state trail bicycle fees will be charged and State bicycle trail passes will be honored. Prior to selling trail passes on the trail or in neighboring businesses, a State Trail Pass Agreement will need to be signed with the WDNR.

User information will include maps, brochures and signing that will provide facility, service, safety and emergency information, rules, regulations and advice on a seasonal basis.

Trail Maintenance

Trail maintenance is directed and performed by the Polk County Buildings, Solid Waste and Park Department and its contractors and cooperators. Primary cooperators are the Polk County Snowmobile Clubs who oversee trail maintenance and grooming for snowmobile use.

E. Interpretation

In Polk County the trail offers many opportunities to make trail users more aware of the landscape they are traveling through. Opportunities exist to provide interpretive information on the geology, the numerous ecosystems, the native wildlife, and the cultural history of the area. Interpretation is a long-term objective that can be accomplished jointly by Polk County and local interest groups.

F. Wildlife Management

The trail passes through many ecosystems and will provide many opportunities to observe wildlife. Due to the limited land base, many wildlife management opportunities are precluded. Polk County will cooperate with the WDNR and other groups interested in wildlife management in making the trail corridor available to wildlife management within the overall objectives of the master plan.

G. Timber and Vegetative Management

The vegetation adjacent to the trail is representative of the great natural diversity that occurs in Northwestern Wisconsin. Most species are native or are considered to be naturalized thus requiring little vegetative management. Some management will be practiced to promote aesthetics, enhance wildlife, and protect trail users and facilities.

H. Management Problems

A number of management problems have been identified that will need to be dealt with as they occur.

- Control of non-allowed uses will be achieved through a combination of public information, using Park and Sheriff's Department personnel, and peer pressure as use of the trail increases.
- Vandalism to signs, bridges and the trail surface will be addressed through regular inspections, rapid repair, enforcement, and peer pressure as the use of the trail increases.
- Trail crossings will require much attention. All existing crossing agreements will require review and modification to reflect the present and future uses. Requests for new crossings will be handled on an individual basis in accord with the WDNR "Department Design Standards Handbook". Routine inspection will insure compliance to crossing agreements and will ensure control of unauthorized crossings.
- Trespass, both to and from the trail corridor may require the use of various control options including planting, fencing, signing, surveying and law enforcement.
- Invasive species management

I. Recreation Needs and Justification

Wisconsin's 2000-2005 Statewide Compliance Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) identifies participation rates of various outdoor recreation activities in each of the WDNR's management districts. Polk County is in the Northern Region which also includes: Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Burnett, Douglas, Florence, Forest, Iron, Langlade, Lincoln, Oneida, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, Taylor, Vilas and Washburn counties. Following is the participation rates among Northern Region residents of the major trail related outdoor recreation activities.

Recreational Activity	Proportion of Adult Recreation Participation-Northern Region
Walking	83.2
Bicycling	37.6
Hiking	49.2
Nature Study	52.3
Bird Watching	37.7
Mountain Biking	18.0
Snowmobiling	27.4
ATV Riding	21.0
Backpacking	9.4
Horseback riding	6.5

J. Analysis of Alternatives

1. Trail Development

Alternative A: Leave the right-of-way in an undeveloped condition

This alternative would leave the right-of-way in its existing condition with no bridge decking or railings, no tread improvements, no signing, and no maintenance. The right-of-way would be fairly safe for low-speed travel by motorized vehicles and on foot during snow-free periods. During periods of snow-cover, snowmobilers, ATV's, skiers and snowshoers could utilize the R.O.W. depending on snow cover. However, the unimproved bridges would pose a liability that would require removing them from public use. In time, vegetation would encroach on the rail bed and safety and trespass problems would likely develop. Use would be limited and mostly very local. Under this alternative, the region will lose out on the resulting economic and health benefits associated with having a state trail in existence.

Alternative B: Limited Trail Development

This alternative would involve grading the rail bed to a 14-foot width, decking and railing the bridges, limited signing, and water grooming. This would provide primarily for winter uses including snowmobiling and ATV use with some opportunity for Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. During snow-free periods the trail would provide limited hiking and bicycling due to the rough trail surface. Use would concentrate on winter activities with only limited summer use primarily by local users.

Alternative C. Full Trail Development

This alternative would involve developing a continuous separate trail tread or dual trail. This alternative would involve grading the rail bed to a 20-foot width, surfacing half of the trail surface with gravel for motorized/horse use and surfacing the remaining half with 4 inches of compacted limestone or 2-inches of asphalt for non-motorized use. Maintenance would cover all seasons. This would provide primary access for hiking and bicycling during snow-free periods, and snowmobiling and ATV use during snow-cover periods as well as some simultaneous usage. Limited secondary activities might include wildlife watching, X-C skiing, and snowshoeing within the R.O.W. but not on the primary trail tread. Use would be year-round and would be local, regional, and potentially state-wide.

2. Trail Support Facilities and Services Development

The potential need and demand for trail support services and facilities such as equipment rental and service, bicycle pass outlets, food, beverages, lodging, accessories, memorabilia, etc. will occur to some degree in the future. As it is quite difficult to accurately predict either the future use of the trail or the corresponding ability of the public sector to respond to it, the recommended alternative is (b) public/private cooperation. The public sector will encourage the private sector to provide for trail user needs. When necessary, the public sector will cooperate in the provisions of support facilities and services. The issue of public participation in the provision of the trail support facilities and services should be closely reviewed at least every five years and the trail Master Plan revised accordingly.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX B: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Amery to Dresser Trail is an abandoned railroad bed running from 90th Avenue in the town of Osceola to Amery. The WDNR purchased the land and reached an agreement with Polk County for the county to operate the trail and determine its use. In March of 2004, the Property, Forest and Recreational Committee established a 13-person advisory committee to recommend trail usage.

The 13 members included town council members as well as residents from the four municipalities that the trail passes through; the towns of Osceola, Garfield, and Lincoln plus the city of Amery. In addition, there were three adjacent land owners and two members of the Polk County Board of Supervisors. The committee met on seven occasions and held two public input sessions.

One of the committee's first actions was to make all decisions by the consensus method of decision making. This action kept the committee from issuing majority and minority reports. Consensus was made on several key issues, however, particularly in terms of trail surface. The committee determined that a continuous separate trail tread or dual trail be developed. The committee also agreed that snowmobile use would be allowed in the winter as well as horse back riding be allowed on the trail. In regards to specific recreational uses of the trail, no compromise was found. Although some committee members who initially favored year-round non-motorized usage agreed to machines in the winter, no consensus was reached.

The issue of trail use will now go to the Property, Forestry and Recreation committee of Polk County. That committee will make a recommendation to the full county board which will then make the final decision on trail usage. Thereafter, the WDNR, the owner of the property, will review all recommendations to assure that environmental and state guidelines are met.