

Great Place Progress Report

Two years ago, in October 2005, the Coon Rapids-Whiterock area was named as one of the first three Iowa Great Places. Although the benefits of the designation were initially unclear, a local committee lost no time in seizing this one-time opportunity. To date, the process has shown amazing results.

The first step after winning Great Places was to pull together a local committee to guide and staff the process. Composed of representatives of the City, the Coon Rapids Development Group, and Whiterock, this committee has met every week for the last two years.

Next the committee worked to transform the winning CR-WRC vision into a series of concrete projects each with plan, budget, timeline, etc. The total wish list topped over \$25 million, so extensive efforts were also made to identify sources of state, private, and federal financing.

Seed money was the first priority. Fortunately, the three pilot communities (Coon Rapids, Sioux City, and Clinton) managed to persuade the Iowa Legislature to award them each a \$1 million infrastructure appropriation to help provide Great Place start-up money. The CR-WRC committee lost no time in dividing their \$1 million to help jumpstart a variety of projects (chart).

INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY THE GREAT PLACE COMMITTEE

	Great Place legislative funds	Total project cost	Status
City-owned Assisted Living	\$200,000	\$1,800,000	Fully funded, under construction
City Park Shelterhouse and playground resurfacing	\$90,000	\$144,000	Construction complete, finishing detail work
Carroll County RV Park Bathroom	\$25,000	\$60,000	Fully funded, under construction
Streetscaping of 5 th Avenue entrance up to RR tracks	\$185,000	\$1,123,000	Part of CAT package
Trail connecting Whiterock with downtown CR	\$250,000	\$1,754,515	Part of CAT package
Initial Whiterock visitor infrastructure and signage	\$250,000	\$723,102	Part of CAT package
Other (Osprey, Roadside & Riverside Parks, stagecoach trail, Nancy Thompson art)		\$203,264	Part of CAT package
TOTAL	\$1,000,000	\$5,807,881	

Note: Originally, the GP committee offered the City \$75,000 towards the potential construction of a new fire house but the City declined move forward with that project at this time, so those funds were reprogrammed towards other city projects.

The first three projects (Assisted Living, Aquatic Park Shelterhouse, and RV park bathroom) are already fully funded and under construction.

The rest of the infrastructure projects were put on hold during the summer of 2007 in order to pursue a \$1.7 million Vision Iowa Community Attractions and Tourism (CAT) grant, approved just a few weeks ago. The overall \$7 million CAT project, titled: "Opening Whiterock; A Public Private Partnership for Rural Tourism," includes \$3 million in Whiterock land match, as well as significant commitments from the City of Coon Rapids (\$500K), CRMU (\$100K), Whiterock (\$100K), Carroll and Guthrie Counties, Coon Rapids residents and businesses, and private foundations.

The goal of the Vision Iowa project is to tie the CR trail system to the business district and enhance it with a Whiterock visitor center, two fishing ponds, restored wetlands, prairie reconstruction, birder amenities, interpretive signage, and public art. This should allow the area to attract and host tourists from across the state that will spend money in local businesses.

Now that CAT has finally been approved, construction should move forward rapidly on these projects. However, the \$1.7 million in CAT funds will not be released until next July and also not until the City and/or Whiterock raise an additional \$350,000 in infrastructure funding (representing just 5% of total project costs). The committee is currently seeking those funds from a variety of sources. **Coon Rapids residents, alumni and businesses are encouraged to contribute! Tax deductible donations can be made to City of Coon Rapids, 123 Third Street, Coon Rapids, IA 50058.**

Infrastructure is just one part of the Great Place vision. In the area of business support, the Great Place Committee published a "Coon Rapids Visitor Guide" the last two years, and in 2007 local residents organized a very successful bus tour. Currently, a Coon Rapids' resident recruitment ad in Mother Earth News is generating calls from around the country. Most importantly, a \$300,000 USDA REDLEG loan for the assisted living project (when repaid) will become a \$360,000 CRMU revolving loan fund for local business and community support. The recent offer of the old Garst Company building for conversion into an artisan/retail space represents another incentive for business development.

Diversity advances include a CR-B Spanish Language and Cultural Assistant as well as annual migrant-worker welcome activities, both of which help to support declining school enrollment.

Discussion and planning also continue on the topic of becoming a more Pedestrian and Bike Friendly community as well as regional trail connections, especially the Coon Rapids-Herndon link. If and when this off road trail is completed it will tie Coon Rapids to the Raccoon River Valley Trail that currently extends from Des Moines to Jefferson.

On the Whiterock front, over the last year Executive Director Tolif Hunt, assisted by office manager Connie Goode, Biologist Elizabeth Hill, and handyman Matt Reiling, has assumed direction of the Conservancy. This team has been busy absorbing the donation of the previous Garst Farm Resorts as well as undertaking detailed resource inventories and grazing pasture reconfigurations. Whiterock has also purchased an adjacent acreage (the former Johnny Johnson

house) and has hosted numerous events including the Project Aware river clean-up and the meeting of all state county conservation boards.

Birds are becoming a big deal at Whiterock. Volunteer birders have already found that Whiterock has at least 29 species of greatest conservation need, and Whiterock's strong bird habitat potential helped lead to the creation of a 54,000-acre DNR Raccoon River Savanna Bird Conservation Area covering most of Guthrie County. SOAR just finished raising a second group of osprey fledglings at Whiterock.

Finally, thanks largely to volunteer Kerry McGrath from Des Moines, huge advances have been made in the historic preservation arena. The City of Coon Rapids established a Historic Preservation Program, appointed a Historic Preservation Commission, and applied for and secured Certified Local Government (CLG) and Preserve America status. It is now moving forward with plans to try to register the whole downtown as a National Register Historic District, to assess and repair the 1911 Town Hall, and to host a November 3rd statewide historic preservation training in Coon Rapids.

“We are extremely pleased with our Great Place progress to date,” says Rachel Garst, Chair of the CR-Great Place Committee. “It shows what even a small community can do if it has a clear vision, lots of gumption, and key support at the right times. We owe great thanks to our state legislators Roberts and Kettering, the state Great Place team, IDED, the Iowa Savings Bank, RC&D M&M Divide, USDA Rural Development, and the Iowa West Foundation, as well as numerous Coon Rapids businesses, residents, and alumni. Without their belief and support, our community would never have come so far, so fast.”