



Enhancing Visitor Experiences

Connections in Conservation

As the Conservation District grew in size, so too did the population of the county. Environmental education had already been embedded in the District's mission. With an influx of new residents, the timing was right for District to expand its program offerings to reach more diverse audiences and targeted user groups. Numerous free and low cost programs were offered to preschooler through senior citizens, and for individuals, families and special interest groups. A variety of special events were added like Paddle in the Park, First Friday Concerts, Celebration of Wildflowers and Art, and The Great Outdoors Beer Trail, to add to the annual favorites like Festival of Sugar Maples, and the Trail of History.

In an effort to further enhance visitor experiences, a variety of recreational activities to pursue within conservation areas were introduced (e.g. snowshoeing, camping, archery, cycling, trail running, paddle sports, birding, cross-country skiing, hunting and yoga). By the end of 2010 School field studies and classroom environmental education programs were offered to over 12,000 students annually, summer day camps provided positive outdoor experiences to nearly 400 children, and special events attracted upwards of 12,000 guests each year. Self-guided learning opportunities were also improved upon through interpretive signage and trail guides, brochures and exhibits, mobile apps, e-learning, webinars, Virtual Field Studies and the Wonders of the Wild video series.

During this time, the Conservation District Police Department established itself as a proactive, positive face of the District. Officers made themselves visible and approachable to site users to aid in creating safe and relaxing places for residents to enjoy outdoor recreational pursuits. The Conservation

Police Department also established a successful volunteer group, The Prairie Trail Safety Watch, later reestablished as SWEEP, where dedicated volunteers regularly tour sites and trails and assist in being extra eyes for officers. Police outreach included events like get Hooked on Fishing, Bike Safety and Hunter Safety courses; as well as participation at the County Fair, the Children's Health and Safety Fair, National Night Out, and Shop with a Cop.

The District's Marketing Department also diversified its community engagement efforts by revamping its quarterly magazine, launching a new website, re-branding the District's logo, hosting a monthly Wide Open Spaces radio show and showcasing the District at multiple community gatherings and festivals. As online technologies and social media platforms increased in popularity, the District jumped in and established its presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Google Business pages as strategic and creative ways to attract and engage thousands of new audiences.

In 2016, the Conservation District convened delegates to the first Conservation Congress of McHenry County. The Conservation Congress provided delegates representing different municipalities, organizations and members of the community a formal process to propose and advocate for actions to protect and conserve our natural resources. These thoughtful leaders and influencers assembled under the premise that if the legacy of public lands bequeathed to us is to continue for the next fifty years and beyond, all interest groups within the county need to come together to speak with one voice about conservation matters. The Conservation Congress delegates reconvened in both 2018 and 2020.

