

Chapter 6 – Community Facilities and Services, Transportation, and Recreation

County Facilities

The Van Buren County Seat is Located in Paw Paw, MI and many county facilities are located within the village.

County Courthouse

Paw Paw has been the county seat since 1837, and Van Buren County officials occupied the first county courthouse (the present Paw Paw City Hall) in 1845. However, in 1900, when the board of supervisors decided to build a new courthouse, it considered moving the county seat. Among others, South Haven, the county's largest town, vied fiercely for the designation, but in a countywide election on April 1, 1901, citizens voted to keep the county seat in Paw Paw.

On September 2, 1901, Frank O. Gilbert, the Grand Master of the Free and Accepted Masons, laid the cornerstone for the present courthouse. Members of the Grand Army of the Republic and fraternal organizations marched through the town in celebration. The Paw Paw True Northerner estimated that between 8,000 and 10,000 people attended the ceremony. The monumental Classical Revival building designed by Jackson architect Claire Allen, was dedicated on February 23, 1903. The Sheldon and Oradell Rupert memorial clock was installed in the tower in 1986. Both of Van Buren's courthouses are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The total cost of the present Courthouse and the old Jail (described below) was \$120,000. In 1999, the Courthouse restructuring and repair project was completed. The upper and lower domes of the Courthouse had to be removed from the top of the building, and the project was completed at a cost of \$249,654.



Photo: Van Buren County Courthouse

County Jail

Dedicated January 26, 1963 a \$4,000,000 addition to the County Jail was completed with the final architect fee retired at the 1963 June session of Van Buren County Board of Supervisors. This addition adjoined the old Jail and housed an additional 55 prisoners. In May of 1981 remodeling of this addition was contracted for \$134,141 and completed in 1982. Renovation of the old Jail was completed in 1987 at costs of approximately \$180,000 and is used for out-county prisoners board. In 2001 another addition and remodeling of the jail was completed, the County Building Authority secured bonds for \$1,935,000 for cost.



Photo: Van Buren County Jail (Courthouse in the Background)

Courthouse Annex Building

The Courthouse Annex was dedicated in July 1976 and houses 7th District Court East on the main floor. In September 1977 the Probate and Juvenile Courts moved in on the second floor. The total cost of the Annex Building was \$663,000. At the end of 2000 the original County Records Building located on Main Street in Paw Paw was damaged extensively by fire. The State Probation offices located in that building had to be moved and now occupy part of the lower level in Courthouse and Annex Building.

DHS, Health Department, Mental Health and Animal Shelter

The Department of Social Services and Health Department Building located on C.R. 681 in Hartford was put into use in May 1974 at a cost of \$446,000 and an addition in October 1978 was completed at a cost of \$605,000. In 1991 the County completed construction of a new building located on C.R. 681 to house the Department of Human Services (formerly the Family Independence Agency) and the 1974 building was renovated to house the Public and Mental Health. Bonding in the amount of \$3,900,000 was obtained for new construction.

The Animal Shelter located off C.R. 681 at Hartford was constructed in January 1978 at a cost of \$125,000.

Human Services East Building

The County Annexed 21.5 acres of Paw Paw Township property to the Village of Paw Paw and purchased the land on Hazen Street in 1989 for future expansion. The first building dedicated October 26, 1990 housed the County Cooperative Extension Service, Community Mental Health and satellite Public Health Office on this property. The County bonded for this first building in the amount of \$2,200,000. In the year 2000 the county erected a new Maintenance Building on the property at a cost of \$139,425.



Photo: Human Services East

County Building West

The Van Buren County Building West at 1007 East Wells Street in South Haven was dedicated in June 1980 at a cost of \$745,000. This building houses the 7th District Court West and a branch office of the Prosecuting Attorney. In 1988 the lower level of this building was assigned to the Mental Health Department for offices at a remodeling cost of \$215,000.

County Administration/Land Services Building

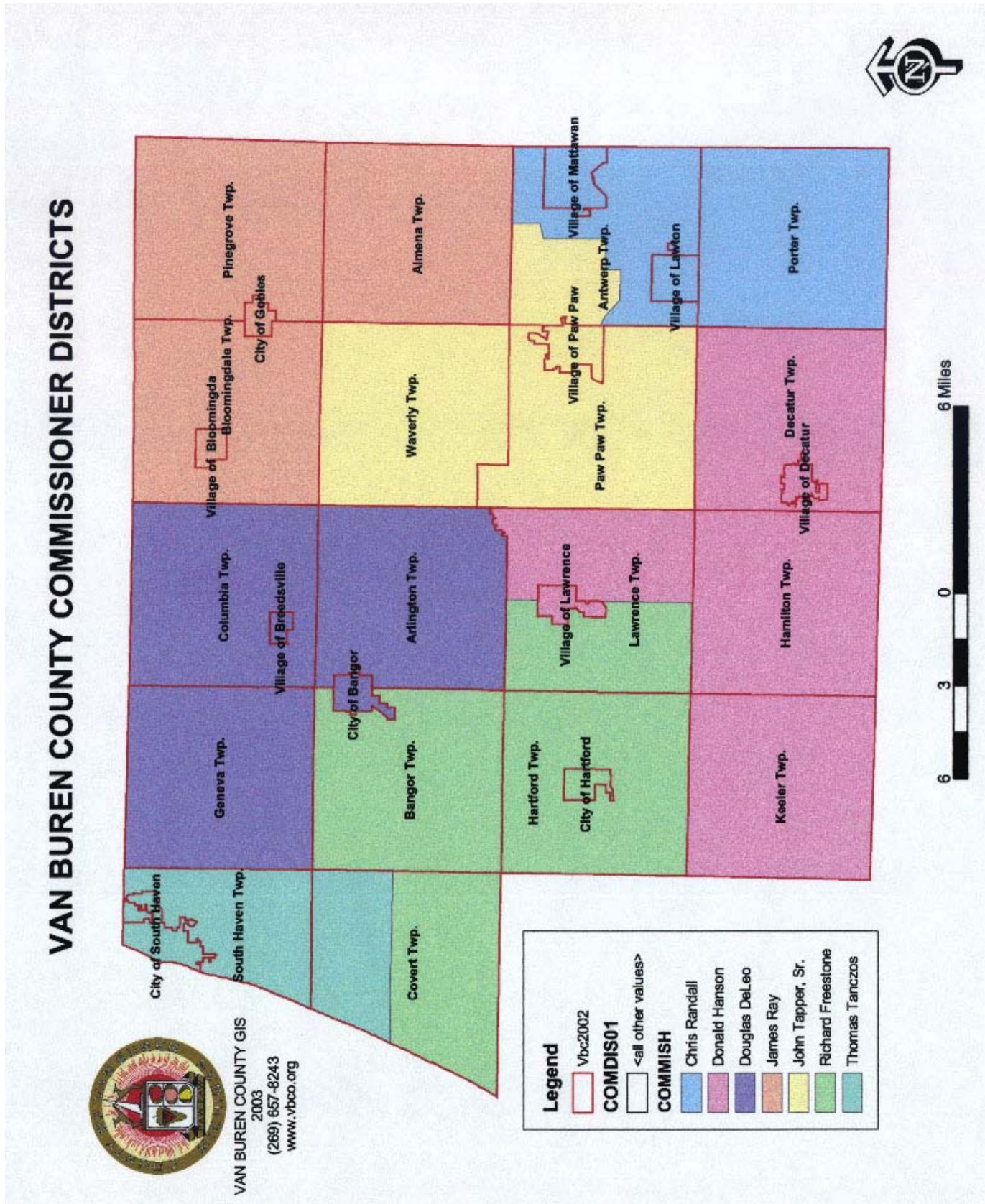
The County purchased the building at 219 Paw Paw Street in November 1997 for \$1,440,000 and named it "Van Buren County Administration/Land Services Building" in 1998. In 1999 vault construction and renovation of the building at a cost of \$1,355,567 was completed. In November 1999 the County Register of Deeds and County Treasurer Offices moved to the main floor of this building, and the County Administrator's Office, Information Services Office and Board of Commissioners moved to the 2nd floor. The Board of Commissioners held their first board meeting in their new meeting room in January 2000 followed by an Open House. Remodeling costs totaled \$1,368,550 including furnishings. Occupants on the third floor are the offices of County Equalization, GIS, the County Drain Commissioner and the Surveyor. The lower level of the building is occupied by the Friend of the Court Office and that was remodeled in 2000 at an approximate cost of \$125,873.

Van Buren County Governmental Departments

Board of Commissioners

The Board of Commissioners is an elected body that was established to conduct the business operations and establish the legislative agenda for Van Buren County. There are seven members elected from districts of approximately the same population size. Following the decennial census, an apportionment commission meets and reapportions the County into the appropriate districts. The Board meets twice a month as a Committee of the Whole where discussion of sub-committee items takes place and twice a month as a Board of Commissioners where action is taken. Their primary job is to adopt policies and ordinances to govern the County and its activities including an annual budget. The vision of the Board of Commissioners is to establish Van Buren County as a progressive county that is responsive to its citizens needs. The mission is to be sensitive to economic, safety, and environmental issues; and encouraging the use of planning, new technology, and creative solutions in meeting County goals. Map 15 displays the 2004 Van Buren County Commissioner Districts.

Map 15



Administration

The County Administrator is an employee of the Board of Commissioners and manages adopted policies and the budget on a day-to-day basis. In addition, the Administrator supervises the work of appointed department heads. The Administrator is the Chief Financial Officer of the County and works with the Clerk and Treasurer in monitoring the County's financial software. The personnel function for much of the County is also handled in this office.

Judicial

The Court system consists of the following: Thirty-Sixth Judicial Circuit Court including the Family Court, Probate Court, and District Courts – East and West. The Circuit Court is split between two elected judges. One does all criminal and civil cases, while the other does all domestic relations cases, some neglect and abuse cases, some delinquency and guardianship cases as well as some mentally ill petitions. The Van Buren Probate Court is the Court that supervises minor and adult guardianships and conservatorships, trust, wills, legal change of name, mentally ill, affidavits of parentage, estates, and civil disputes involving estates. The Probate Judge now serves two-thirds of his time in the Family Division of the Circuit Court handling mostly delinquency and abuse and neglect cases and some domestic relations cases. Van Buren County's District Court is the 7th District and is divided into two divisions: District Court East in Paw Paw and District Court West in South Haven. The District Court is the first level of court for both civil and criminal matters. In civil litigation, the District Court has jurisdiction if the amount is less than \$25,000. District Court judges also conduct preliminary examinations and arraignments in felony cases. Other operations include a traffic bureau and small claims court.

County Clerk

The County Clerk, an elected official, is a constitutional office with a four-year term. The State statute prescribes the duties. The County Clerk as Clerk of the Circuit Court, has control of court files, and maintains all case filings, oaths, and the Circuit Court Seal. The County Clerk is Register of County Vital Statistics. Records and indices are maintained on all County vital statistics (e.g., births, deaths, and marriages). The County Clerk is also Clerk of the County Board of Commissioners. Duties for this function include preparation of the minutes of the Board, present communications, and comply with directives of the Board. As Chief Election Officer for the County, the County Clerk supervises elections, acts as filing official for County Petitions as well as filing officer under the Campaign Finance Act. The countywide voter registration listing is maintained on the statewide QVF computer system. The Clerk is a member of the County Election Commission, acts as Clerk for the County Election Scheduling Committee and for the County Election Board of Canvassers. The Clerk is also responsible for preparation of all accounts payable checks, and accepts vouchers to pay invoices from all departments. Various other duties include acting as Clerk of the Gun Board, filing Assumed Named Certificates, processing passports and notary

commissions, participating as a member of the County Plat Board and County Apportionment Commission, and filing Veteran's Discharges.

Prosecuting Attorney

The Van Buren County Prosecutor is an elected position, responsible for statutory duties and the daily operations of the Prosecutor's Office. The primary charge of the Prosecutor is to review complaints to determine if adequate facts exist and appropriate procedures were taken to charge an individual for criminal wrongdoing. Thereafter, the Prosecutor determines the charges to be brought against each perpetrator. Following conviction, the Prosecutor may also recommend sentencing to the Court.

Register of Deeds

State law prescribes the duties of this elective, four-year term office: official recording and/or filing office for all legal documents affecting Real Property. Examples include sheriff's deeds, mortgages, assignments of mortgages, discharge of mortgages, patents, oil and gas leases, plats and restrictions, rights of way, various liens, Circuit Court orders, Probate orders and wills where real estate is concerned, and Survey Certificates. State law establishes all fees for recording and/or filing. Revenues are turned over the County General Fund. The Register of Deeds is Chairman of the County Plat Board, which approves all new subdivision within Van Buren County. Finally, the Register of Deeds serves the public with research on all instruments.

Treasurer

State law and authorization of the County Board of Commissioners provide the duties of the County Treasurer. The two main roles of the Treasurer are the custodian of all County funds and the collector of taxes. The County receives money from several sources. The principle source is an ad valorem property tax. Other income is received from grants, interest, and various fees. Besides revenue items, the Treasurer is responsible for accounts in trust and agency funds. In Van Buren County, the Treasurer is also a member of the Building Authority.

Drain Commissioner

The County Drain Commissioner acts under Public Act 40 of 1956, as amended, and has jurisdiction over all county drains. There are more than 540 county drains in Van Buren County. Drains may be open channels, enclosed in tile, or a combination to allow for the flow of storm water to a suitable outlet. A distinction is made between drains within the County (intra-county) and drains shared with neighboring Counties (inter-county). The County Drain Commissioner works with local property owners, county municipalities, the Soil Erosion & Sedimentation Control Agent, the County Road Commission, the Michigan Department of Transportation, and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. When improved storm water drainage is wanted, a petition may be made by municipalities or by the drainage district landowners to the County Drain

Commission. The process includes: application and petition, public notice, approval by a Board of Determination, release of landowner right of ways, notice of assessment, receipt of bids, letting of construction contract, review of apportionment, and assessment to tax bills.

Sheriff Department

The Sheriff Department operates many different divisions in the name of Public Safety. The Road Patrol responsibilities include patrolling, accident investigation, criminal investigation, traffic enforcement, and other law enforcement related activities. The Marine Division patrols 113 County inland lakes as well as Lake Michigan and the Black River. The Marine Division enforces State Marine Laws and does watercraft safety inspections as well as conducting boating and water safety classes. The dive team performs rescue and body recovery throughout the year. The Sheriff Department also has separate contracts with various municipalities. The Corrections Department maintains security and provides a safe living condition for inmates as well as employees. Other responsibilities include the alternative work program and the Emergency Management office.

State Probation Office

The State Probation Office provides two basic services to Van Buren County. The first is the completion of persistence and investigation reports. The report aids judges in sentencing. The second service is the supervision of all adult offenders sentenced to probation by the Van Buren County Circuit Court as well as offenders who are residents of Van Buren County who have been placed on probation elsewhere. The staff members are employees of the Michigan Department of Corrections. Van Buren County provides office space and equipment.

Equalization

State law mandates the duties of the Equalization Department. Property values are determined by monitoring the sales of residential, agricultural, commercial, and industrial lands. Appraisal studies are done in the agricultural, commercial, and industrial classes by visitation to the various properties to determine the level of assessment by the local assessor. This study provides for uniformity between all cities and townships within the County, making sure each assessing unit is equalized at true cash value.

Michigan State University Extension

The mission of the Michigan State University Extension office is to help people improve their lives through an educational process that applies knowledge to critical issues, needs, and opportunities. Extension provides information and offers on-going educational programs in three areas: Agriculture and Natural Resources; Children, Youth and Family; and Community and Economic Development. These programs have similar goals. They seek to help people better understand their environment, make the best possible use of their

resources, and enhance the quality of lives for themselves, their families and their communities through education and wise decision making.

Information Services

The Van Buren County Information Services Department is responsible for voice and data communication within the County operations. This includes all maintenance, upkeep, and repair of equipment including personal computers, file servers, midrange computers (AS/400), network equipment, and other voice and data equipment located within County locations. The Information Services Department is responsible for the upkeep and training for all operating systems. The Information Services Department also provides support of local taxing units by way of computer support, annual printer maintenance contracts, and input of yearly database and related information from Resource Software for taxing purposes. The Information Services Department also serves as a resource for information regarding computer and related items. The philosophy of the Information Services Department is to strive to provide Van Buren County with a structurally sound department that is always on the move to become better, more efficient and able to handle the needs of the ever-changing work environment of today.

Building & Grounds

The Building & Grounds Department maintains all equipment, plumbing, heating, air conditioning, electrical, and general upkeep of all County buildings. There are thirteen County buildings (310,000 square feet). The Building & Grounds Department also takes care of County landscaping needs (325,000 square feet) and parking lot maintenance (480,000 square feet).

Animal Control

The Animal Control office handles all domestic animal complaints including animals running at large and cruelties to animals. Animal bites are documented and animals are checked for rabies, vaccinations and licenses. There is a kennel to house strays. The Animal Control Department strongly urges spaying and neutering of all pets.

GIS

The Geographic Information System Division is responsible for: converting paper tax maps into digital parcel maps linked to the tax administration database, identifying sources of land management data and organize the information into usable layers, maintain an atlas of land based information in digital form, and coordinate, develop and manage the work plan, training and resources with local governments and County departments

Land Description

Responsibilities of the Land Description Division include: creation and maintenance of the County Tax Mapping System, maintaining tax descriptions together with name and address changes, maintaining the house numbering program, and coordinating the remonumentation program.

Human Services

There are various other entities, some tied to the County via the budget, others not, that need to be mentioned. A summary of their operations will not be given here, rather they should be contacted directly: Family Independence Agency, Public Health, Community Mental Health, Friend of the Court, Intermediate School District, Public Transit, Region IV Agency on Aging, Road Commission, Southwest Michigan Commission, and the Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency.

Public Transportation

Currently, the Van Buren Public Transit can service customers anywhere within Van Buren County and offers the following services:

- Dial-A-Ride: curb to curb service within the Paw Paw and South Haven areas Monday through Friday.
- Countywide: 24-hour Call ahead/reservation within the boundaries of Van Buren County.
- Contract: priority transportation services to agencies for their clients. Charges vary due to need assessment of services to be provided.
- Special Services: providing transportation services to groups and organizations, etc. within Van Buren County.

Currently, the county Transit Board oversees the public transit system, with some oversight from the BOC, and it is funded through state and federal dollar. However, the current public transit system is undergoing a review to determine how to best serve and public in the future and how services will be funded. After this review, services are likely to be significantly altered.

For more information contact Van Buren Public Transit at 610 David Walton Drive, Bangor, MI 49013 or call toll free 1-800-828-2015.

In addition to public transit, the county is served by a network of interstate and highway roads, as well as airports and passenger trains. Area airports include: Gerald R. Ford International (Grand Rapids), Kalamazoo/Battle Creek International, Capital City (Lansing), Southwest Michigan Regional (Benton Harbor), South Bend Regional, Midway and O'Hare International (both in Chicago), and many smaller airstrips for private craft. Area Amtrak stops include: Bangor, Kalamazoo, Dowagiac, Niles, South Bend, Elkhart and multiple stops in the Chicago area.

Recreation

County Museums

There are many museums and historical sites throughout the county. Some of these are listed at vbco.org. The two museums with a direct county connection include:

Van Buren County Museum

Operated by the Van Buren County Historical Society, the Van Buren County museum is housed in the historic 1884 county poorhouse on Red Arrow Highway in Hartford. The museum contains three floors of historical items, a replica of a log cabin and a blacksmith works.

The museum is open Wednesday and Saturday from 10:00 am until 4:00 pm and on Sunday from 1:00 pm until 5:00 pm.

Time Capsule Museum

Originally constructed in 1875, the Time Capsule Museum was next to the courthouse and held important county records. Over the years, the building served as an office to many organizations, including the county health department, an insurance company, and the state probation offices. After a fire was set in the probation office, the building was restored using \$189,900 from the insurance settlement and an additional \$8-9,000 from the county. A new roof and windows were added.

Currently, the museum contains artifacts that were placed in the cornerstone of the county courthouse in 1901. In celebration of the 100th birthday of the courthouse, the items were removed from their capsule and placed on display in the museum, which can be found at 226 E. Michigan in Paw Paw. The museum is open by appointment and also serves as a satellite office for the MSU Extension.

Van Buren County Fairgrounds

Approximately 80 acres of Van Buren County property have been leased out to the county fairboard for 50 years in order to host the Van Buren County Youth Fair. The lease was most recently renewed in 1970. At the time of the board's acquisition of the property, it was bare land. However, through volunteer efforts, many improvements have been made. A campground and buildings have been added, and various structures and electrical systems have been renovated. In 2001, the board purchased and planted approximately 75 trees from a nursery auction in order to add shade to the grounds. Asphalt was added in 2005 to ensure handicap accessibility. Funding for purchases is primarily derived from fair revenues. However, the board has recently applied for 501 C3 status, which will allow for grant funding applications.

Each July, the 6-day youth fair draws approximately 50,000 attendees, not including special admittance for Seniors, Ladies, and Kids days. In 2005, there were approximately 600 4-H exhibitors and an additional 400 open-class exhibits.

While the fairgrounds do not have a permanent main stage amphitheater, unique features of the land provide for a natural amphitheater with hillside seating for main entertainment events. Additional information on the Van Buren County Youth Fair can be found at: <http://web1.msue.msu.edu/vanburen/4hfair.htm>.

Recreational opportunities abound in Van Buren County. In addition to the museums and historical sites (including the County Courthouse), there are numerous outdoor activities available from trails to camping to beaches.

Trails

Kal-Haven/Van Buren Trails

Currently, Van Buren County operates and maintains the Kal-Haven and Van Buren Trails, which were developed from former railways. The Kal-Haven is 34 miles long with trailheads in South Haven and Kalamazoo. It has a packed surface and is great for bikers, hikers, and joggers. The Van Buren Trail is 14 miles long with trailheads in Hartford and at the Van Buren State Park (see below). It has a more natural, loose surface, and is great for horse riders, mountain bikers, and hikers.

Passes are required and are available at the trailheads and at a variety of vendor locations. Revenue generated from pass sales is necessary for trail operation, and is used for maintenance work like resurfacing, brush and trash clearing, new equipment, signs, paint, and restroom servicing. Official maintenance is handled each week by county road commission crews, but minor work is also done by trail staff during their shifts. In addition to minor maintenance, trail staff check passes, assist riders, and handle suggestions and complaints. Pass sales revenue also funds the staff that works on and for the trail.

Thousands of local residents and tourists use the trails each year. Many youth, non-profit, and recreational organizations request to use the trails each year, often for multi-day rides. Through the partnership efforts of the various groups who operate and have special interests in the trails, operations should run smoothly for years to come.

Bangor/South Haven Heritage Water Trail

The Bangor/South Haven Heritage Water Trail is a proposed canoe and kayak trail encompassing 20 miles of the South Branch of the Black River between the cities of Bangor and South Haven in Van Buren County, Michigan. Signs along the route will educate and inform trail users about local history and the environment. The trail will provide creative ways for people to enjoy nature and history while promoting environmental awareness, local tourism, and economic development.

The Heritage Water Trails Project was started by Dr. Dave Lemberg, AICP of the Department of Geography and the Great Lakes Center for Maritime Studies at

Western Michigan University. It was authorized by Senate Bill 415 of 2002 to develop a statewide recognition program to be known as the "Michigan Heritage Water Trail Program".

With the acquisition and future management of a county trail system, it will be important for affected planning commissions to take into account the trail system into all land-use decisions.

Camping

There are many campgrounds, both public and private, in and around Van Buren County that provide ample opportunity for recreation. One of the most popular is the Van Buren State Park.

The Van Buren State Park offers approximately 400 acres of land located along the Lake Michigan shoreline in northern Van Buren County. The focal points of the park are its high dune formations and one mile of sandy beach. Van Buren became a state park in May of 1965 when the original 167-acre plot was purchased from the Harry LaBar Drake family. Since then two other land purchases have been made to make up the current park (<http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/>). A map of the campground can be seen by typing the following URL into an internet browser:
http://www.michigandnr.com/Publications/PDFS/RecreationCamping/van_buren_map.pdf.

Waterways, Wineries, and More

The county's abundance of rivers, lakes, and ponds allow for water sports, such as skiing and tubing, boating, and fishing. Not the least of these bodies of water is Lake Michigan, of which Van Buren County hosts approximately 26 miles. Thousands of tourists and residents take advantage of water recreation each summer.

In addition to waterways, Van Buren hosts nearly a dozen golf courses, as well as two raceways that offer county residents and visitors the chance to participate and watch sporting events.

Prime soils in the county allow for grape growing, which provides ample opportunity for winemaking. Several wineries in and near Van Buren County produce wine and offer tours of the facilities. See vbco.org for more information.

With so many natural resources in the county, from farmland that produces specialty crops to the Great Lakes, there is ample opportunity for celebration. Festivals are offered throughout the county and throughout the year, providing opportunities for residents and tourists to enjoy good company, entertainment, and local resources.

Additionally, the county supports the development of local recreation plans in order for local units of government to identify existing and future parkland, open

space, and recreation areas and needs, recommend specific projects that could address these needs, and identify policies (including site selection and design review) and financing options to assist with implementation and management of projects. Such plans can also include maps to assist with decision-making for future land acquisitions.