

Chapter 7

Conclusions

Through the development of the Western Reserve Heritage Feasibility Study, including the collection of information regarding the natural, historical, and cultural resources and the development of the “Town Square” interpretive theme that is prevalent throughout the 14-county region of the Western Reserve, the abundance of unique heritage and resources of the Western Reserve became apparent. They are important to the traditions and stories of our country, reminding us of our national origins.

Located on the north coast of Ohio, the Western Reserve celebrates the unique architecture, land use, social values, and industrial innovation of the late 18th and early 19th century. As settlers from Connecticut migrated to the Western Reserve of Ohio, they brought with them their values, customs, and traditions, including the development of the Town Square. The Town Square is where individuals gathered for pursuits of pleasure, business, and social reform. From

Cleveland to Burton and Oberlin, evidence of this historic Western Reserve Town Square is still evident on the landscape today. Evidence of a “vanguard of thinking” is found throughout the region, as those living in the Western Reserve pursued new products, new social reform platforms, and innovations. Just as the “Town Square” concept was vanguard thinking during the late 18th and early 19th century, the Western Reserve Heritage Area concept is gathering support throughout the 14-county region in northern Ohio.

As mentioned previously, one of the foundations of all successful heritage areas is an informed and engaged community that is committed to the long-term sustainability of the regional project. Active participation and strong support from all facets of the community are essential to cultivating partnerships and collaborations that leverage resources for the conservation and interpretation of the natural, historic, and cultural resources. While there is public interest for a Western

Reserve Heritage Area designation among elected officials, planning agencies, park agencies and individuals, and little opposition, increased public investment and commitment is necessary to develop the sustainable partnerships and collaborations for this important regional project. More importantly, the elected officials, units of government, community leaders, organizations, and citizens of the 14-county region need to make the Western Reserve Heritage Area a priority for the region and commit the necessary resources and investments for its long-term success.

In its current state, the proposed Western Reserve Heritage Area is similar to other heritage area initiatives across the countries that develop from a seed of an idea and grow into a fully engaged regional resource conservation development project. Through the community engagement strategy of the Western Reserve Heritage Feasibility Study, information about the proposed heritage area, its resources, and designation benefits was shared with the general public, elected

officials, and units of government. Increased community engagement and cultivation is necessary to enhance understanding and increase support for the Western Reserve Heritage Area. The community engagement strategy should continue in order to cultivate the strategic public-private partnerships for the Western Reserve Heritage Area.

One of the other challenges of the proposed Western Reserve Heritage Area is the large geography of the region. Working with community partnerships and collaborations across a 14-county region is challenging, and a process and structure for communication and partnership cultivation should be developed to build cohesion and a true regional identity in the Western Reserve. Currently, there is no regional structure or organization within the proposed 14-county Western Reserve Heritage Area to coordinate the community engagement strategy and partnership cultivation. However, that does not prohibit one of the regional organizations or a new regional organization to step forward and provide the leadership for the development of the Western Reserve Heritage Area.

Recommendations

In evaluating the Western Reserve to determine if the area meets requirements as outlined in the Western Reserve Heritage Area Study Act, the National Park Service is looking at two distinctive sets of evaluation criteria—suitability and feasibility.

The determination of suitability looks at whether national heritage designation is appropriate. The National Park Service concludes that the Western Reserve contributes to our country's national heritage. It contains an assemblage of natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources that make up a distinctive landscape, and the rich and varied stories about the Western Reserve support a captivating set of themes connecting the people to the heritage resources of the region. The Western Reserve comprises a story and resources of great regional, and state significance that influenced the nation, but is not determined nationally distinctive by the National Park Service and as such is not suitable for national designation.

The second evaluation method, feasibility, looks at whether implementation of the goals and vision of a National Heritage Area is capable of being accomplished. The opportunity to come together as a region and pool resources in support of the significant, shared story is recognized by

many. As this opportunity is realized by more, the committed support for the heritage area concept as well as direct financial commitments may grow, but that level of support is currently not present. At this time, there is a lack of an established coordinating entity, local capacity, and commitment to undertake the responsibilities of initiating a future national heritage area. The National Park Service determines that the Western Reserve is not feasible for national designation based on feasibility criterion.



The National Park Service feels that designation is not the best course of action at this time. It recommends the Western Reserve Heritage Area concept be implemented as a regional initiative.

Recommended First Steps

At this stage in the project's assessment, the National Park Service concludes that two critical feasibility study criteria have not been met. In order to further develop the Western Reserve Heritage Area concept, the following steps are recommended:

- Engage members of the Western Reserve Heritage Feasibility Study Team and the National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance office to use their experience and skills with the development of organizational capacity building and community engagement to develop a further strategy for the Western Reserve Heritage Area.
- Develop a locally managed regional leadership structure to advocate for the development of the Western Reserve Heritage Area. This could be created through enhancing the current Stakeholder committee, creating a new body, or having one of the regional organizations serve as a host organization.



- Develop a regional communication and organizational structure for the 14-county Western Reserve Heritage Area to build cohesion and a true regional identity in the Western Reserve. Dividing the Western Reserve into regions would start to create synergy within each of those regions and cultivate partnerships within each region. It is important, however, that those divisions of the region ease administrative goals, but do not interfere with the overall goal of unification of the entire Western Reserve.
- Establish a regular meeting schedule, draft an operational budget for the organization, and develop a 3-year fundraising plan for the organization.

- Maintain the community engagement strategy by hosting regional public meetings, sponsoring workshops, and developing newsletters to continue to share information about the Western Reserve Heritage Area project, its purpose, and why it is an important project worth pursuing.

Through these early action steps, the Western Reserve Heritage Area will be able to cultivate the necessary community commitment and investment necessary to leverage the resources for the interpretation and development of the natural, historical, and cultural resources of the Western Reserve Heritage Area.

Most importantly, community leaders, elected officials, and nonprofit organizations need to recognize that regional partnerships and collaboration takes an increased amount of time, energy, and resources to cultivate. Working on heritage areas is like running a marathon, not a sprint. Through the long-term commitment to the regional vision, innovative and entrepreneurial partnerships and collaborations are cultivated, significant resources are leveraged, and sustainable communities are created.

