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## New president sets goals for park's Friends group

By Brooke Bechen The Country Today

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Phase I of the new equestrian campground at Governor Dodge State Park was completed in 2019 and included new vault toilet, an informational kiosk and a picnic/rest area.

Photo by Brooke Bechen

**DODGEVILLE** — One of Wisconsin's largest parks, Governor Dodge State Park, attracts over 500,000 people to southwest Wisconsin each year to enjoy recreation from hiking and biking to swimming and fishing.

However, visitors to the park may not think about everything that goes on behind the scenes or the dedicated people that make sure the beauty of the park is preserved so it can be enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of visitors to come.

Working closely with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the volunteers that make up the Friends of Governor Dodge State Park work together to support recreation, education and environmental stewardship in the park, taking on three to four projects each year that the group, in conjunction with park staff, would like to see completed. They've recently elected a new president, Jean Warrior of Verona, a horse owner and rider who has been active in the Friends group for many years, and who has set several goals for the group for 2020.

Warrior's love for Governor Dodge State Park began in 1997 when she and her husband bought land adjoining the state park. Part of Warrior's interest in securing the land was the 25 miles of horse riding trails encompassed within the park, easily accessed from the land the couple bought.

It wasn't long after the Warriors bought the land that they were recruited to join the Friends by an equestrian member. At that time, there weren't many equestrian members in the group, with Warrior joining to help develop an equestrian presence within the Friends.

Today, the equestrian committee is one of the most active within the Friends of Governor Dodge State Park, working diligently to advance a special project they've been working on. For four decades, horseback riding has been a tradition at Governor Dodge State Park; however, the current horse campground, which was never meant to be permanent, is lacking amenities and the privacy horse riders appreciate.

Warrior explained that the current campground site is small, with only 11 sites total, none of which are electric. Horse trailers sit close together on a deteriorating asphalt lot that is inconveniently located in a busy area of the park, with access to the horse trail by crossing a heavily trafficked park road. And with more trails than can be explored in a single day, equestrians that want to stay overnight may skip camping at the park due to the campground's lack of amenities.

The Friends began fundraising for the new equestrian campground in June 2018, receiving a \$69,000 commitment from the Wisconsin Horse Council after a member bequested funds for the project. Since then, the Friends have had fundraisers and applied for grants, working their way to \$250,000 raised, which allowed them to complete Phase I of their campground project in 2019.



With Phase I now complete, horseback riders can now access a new area within the park for day riding. Two new vault toilets were constructed, along with a new picnic area/rest stop for riders and hikers enjoying the trail and a water fountain/horse spigot. A kiosk with information is another new addition to the area, which is now located in a quieter section of the park with beautiful cliffside views.

Phase II will include moving earth to create 21 new equestrian campsites, complete with privacy, camping pads, etc. And while Warrior isn't sure Phase II will happen in 2020, the Friends are determined to continue raising funds to give the popular park the equine facility it deserves.

In addition to seeking sponsors, applying for grants and hosting fundraisers, the Friends are also working with 100 Extraordinary Women to see that the equine project is completed. 100 Extraordinary Women is a national organization that empowers women to join together to support causes they believe in and create a bigger impact than they could on their own, pledging either \$1,000 as a single donation, \$200 a year for five years or about \$17 each month for several years.

Warrior said the goal is to make donation more affordable, finding 100 women that want to make a difference. Currently, the group has about 40 women signed up and a few more with commitments to donate, with the extraordinary women that donate to receive special acknowledgement at the equestrian campground and an invite to a donor gala hosted by Alexa King, a well-known sculptor and horse enthusiast.

The Friends have other projects they hope to complete in 2020, including several deferred maintenance projects as the weather set them a bit behind with some of their projects last year. Replacing a set of steps on the Pine Cliff Natural Trail and a set of steps near Cox Hollow dam are on the list for 2020, along with the re-staining of sign posts along trails to better preserve the wood.

Trail maintenance is also on the minds of park staff and the Friends group. With changing weather and an increase in precipitation over the years, some problem areas on trails, especially with erosion, need to be addressed. The Friends will work with park maintenance to help fix some of those problem areas on the trails.

As president, Warrior has set a few goals for herself and the Friends group for 2020. Warrior plans to focus on membership and community development, with her No. 1 goal to increase engagement with the next generation of nature lovers and park enthusiasts.

"If we don't have youth that appreciate the outdoors and the joys of being a volunteer, a lot of things won't happen that need to happen," she said.

She hopes to schedule a Youth Volunteer Day this year, inviting youth from area schools to help with smaller projects that can always be done around the park. It is important to Warrior to engage the youth and stoke within them a will to want to contribute something positive to the world.

Along with youth engagement, Warrior and the Friends also aim to build an endowment fund and an operating reserve to assist the park when funds are short or unexpected needs arise.

"The role of Friends groups across the state have been more important over the years, especially with budget changes," she said. "We would like to build a fund and have a cushion."

For more information about the Friends of Governor Dodge State Park, the new equestrian campground or to donate to the project, visit [www.friendsofgovdodge.org](http://www.friendsofgovdodge.org).

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