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Ann Arbor spends \$1.3 million to add 146 acres to Greenbelt

CONCENTRATE, 3/4/2009

Ann Arbor is throwing a lot more money at expanding its Greenbelt.

The City Council just approved spending \$1.3 million to acquire the development rights to the Merkel-Heller farms in Webster Township, a few miles northwest of the city near the intersection of Joy and Zeeb roads. It's adjacent to land that has already been incorporated into the Greenbelt.

The city (\$570,000), Webster Township Land Preservation Fund (\$110,00) and Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (the rest) are all chipping in to make the purchase.

"It the most glorious farmland," says Peg Kohring, an official with the Greenbelt. "It's a very productive farm."

The city's [Greenbelt Program](#) has been on a bit of a spending spree as of late as developers and locals sell the development rights to land to the Greenbelt in this tight economy.

Voters approved the Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Program in 2003. The program collects a 0.5-mill millage for the next 30 years. That money is used purchase the development rights to rural land around the city, preserving and protecting open space, natural habitats and farms. The program has acquired the rights to hundreds of acres or rural land.

Source: City of Ann Arbor and Peg Kohring, an official with the Greenbelt

Writer: **Jon Zemke**

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The Michigan Daily

Ann Arbor City Council unanimously passes Greenbelt expansion, postpones plastic bag ban decision

By Lara Zade
Daily Staff Reporter On March 2nd, 2009

Ann Arbor's Greenbelt holdings are now 146 acres larger after City Council voted unanimously to purchase the development rights of land in Webster Township at last night's meeting.

The cost to buy the land totaled just over \$1.3 million. Funding for the 146-acre purchase will come from a combination of the city's Greenbelt funds, federal grants and money from Webster Township. Taxpayers will contribute less than 15 percent of the cost.

Also known as the Open Space and Parkland Preservation Millage, Ann Arbor's Greenbelt District is a program to provide funding for the city to secure and preserve undeveloped areas around the city limits.

According to the city's official Greenbelt website, the plan's three primary goals of the plan are to preserve large blocks of farmland in five target areas, preserve land alongside the Huron River and major tributaries and obtain maximum leverage of taxpayer money through use of grant funds, partnerships and landowner donations.

The city began purchasing development rights to family farms for the purpose of protecting the surrounding land, after voters approved a tax levy to help fund the program in November 2003.

"I think this is a great addition to the Greenbelt program," said Ann Arbor City Councilmember Carsten Hohnke (D-Ward 5).

Hohnke added that the purchase of the development rights of the Webster Township land will help to create an excess of 400 acres of farmland in the Greenbelt holdings.

Mayor John Hieftje was equally excited about the purchase. He said that land protection and an increased emphasis on local agriculture will become more important in the years to come as transportation costs increase.

"There's no reason why years later this land can't be used for local agricultural growth," he said.

Another environmental issue discussed at the meeting was a proposal to ban plastic shopping bags in the city, which was first introduced by Councilmember Stephen Rapundalo (D-Ward 2) in a meeting last June.

City Council later tabled the proposal to allow for a period of public comment.

Last night council members unanimously voted to postpone action on the ban until June 1 in order to enable more discussion between city staff and local retailers.

“There’s still a little bit more work to do at this time,” said Rapundalo.

If the ordinance is approved, stores that gross more than \$1 million annually will be prohibited from distributing plastic bags to customers at checkout.

In a previous interview with the Daily, Rapundalo said that the \$1 million limit will target larger-grossing businesses and protect smaller local businesses that can’t afford alternatives to plastic.

He added that the reason for the ban was to stop the proliferation of plastic bags floating around the city.

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Real estate slump may speed pace of land deals for Ann Arbor's greenbelt program

Posted by Judy McGovern | The Ann Arbor News March 09, 2009 08:10AM

It might seem like a good time to be in the open-space preservation business.

Development pressure in areas outside Ann Arbor and other communities has fallen from intense to nonexistent. And any developers or development companies that had been sitting on potentially buildable land might well be ready to dump it.

But it's not a simple matter of scooping up prized properties.

For at least a year, members of Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Advisory Commission and their counterparts in Washtenaw County's Natural Areas Preservation Program have worried about over-buying when it's unclear where prices will bottom out.

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- [Ann Arbor area farmers may be more reluctant to sell development rights as prices sag](#)

With market conditions changing rapidly and few transactions, property appraisals are viewed with some skepticism. Developers under financial pressure have wanted to move faster than the city's greenbelt program could hope to respond.

"They say they need to make a deal right now or the property goes to the bank," said Laura Rubin, chairwoman of the city's greenbelt commission.

To deal with those conditions and to try to take advantage of potential deals, the greenbelt program is launching a special initiative: Between now and May 4, property owners in the greenbelt target area interested in selling land or development rights are being invited to set their price.

Although the city program has no obligation to accept any of the proposals, it is promising an expedited process for any acquisitions greenbelt officials decide to pursue.

That's different than the normal process, where purchases are tightly tied to appraisals and a policy of pursuing federal grants means transactions can take a year or more to complete.

"We've struggled with what to pay," said Rubin. While those involved in the program want to be fair, they also have a responsibility to make the tax dollars that created the program go as far as possible.

