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Glimpse of Green: Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Program making strides on preserving open space

By RYAN J. STANTON

Members of the Webster United Church of Christ - the oldest continuously used church in Washtenaw County - say they thought long and hard before agreeing to relinquish the development rights to 94.4 acres behind their aging building.

The fact that the land was historically used for agricultural purposes was a major consideration when the congregation decided to accept the \$613,000 offer by the city of Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Program. That will ensure the property can't be developed and will remain forever preserved as open space.

Now entering its seventh year, the Ann Arbor taxpayer-funded Greenbelt Program is making strides. Administrators of the program are reporting 2009 was one of the most successful years to date. After the purchases of multiple properties in Webster Township, an actual greenbelt is starting to form around Ann Arbor.

"The congregation overall felt that it was important to maintain the property," said Jim Kulp, chairman of the church committee that evaluated putting the land into the preservation program. "We felt that it would be best to utilize it as a green space area, and when we learned of the Greenbelt Program,



The city of Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Program recently purchased the development rights to 286 acres of farmland owned by Bill Nixon of Webster Township for \$2.14 million. Aside from being the largest chunk of land ever acquired by the Greenbelt Program, the purchase is significant because the property once was slated to become a manufactured home park. (Photo by Ryan J. Stanton | AnnArbor.com)

we looked into it and it appeared to be an excellent program that would serve that purpose."

A stone's throw away from the church, at the intersection of Zeeb and Daly roads in rural Webster Township, lies another 286 acres of farmland owned by Bill Nixon. At the end of December, the city closed on the purchase of development rights to Nixon's property for \$2.14 million.

Aside from being the largest chunk of land ever acquired by the Greenbelt Program, the purchase of the development rights on the 286-acre Nixon farm is significant because

the property once was slated to become a manufactured home park.

"After having faced that, to have Bill now turn around and put this in the PDR is a great thing," said Webster Township resident Spencer Ford, who owns 90 acres of property across the road that he is considering putting into the Greenbelt.

"It's been a great program," Ford said. "It's really great for Webster Township, and I love what it's doing for Ann Arbor, too. It would have been a shame to have turned into another Canton and have solid development all the way around the city."

A total of 709 acres were added to the Greenbelt in 2009, which includes 607 acres in Webster Township and 102 acres in Lodi Township. That brings the total land protected by the program to date to 1,782 acres.

Those acres are spread across eight townships surrounding Ann Arbor, including Webster, Northfield, Ann Arbor, Salem, Superior, Pittsfield, Lodi, and Scio townships.

"We're just delighted with closing the projects at the end of the year," said Peg Kohring, midwest regional director for The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit firm under contract with the city to administer the program.

"The big thing that's been done this year is that it's blocks of land," Kohring said. "When we started out with the Greenbelt, we did individual properties in kind of spread-out townships, but now we're actually doing blocks of land that are safe to drive a tractor between and that will actually lead to sustainable farming."



The congregation of the Webster United Church of Christ recently decided to relinquish the development rights to 94.4 acres of property to the city of Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Program. (Photo by Ryan J. Stanton | AnnArbor.com)

Critical matching funds were received this past year, resulting in an average 1-to-1 match for every dollar the city spent. A total of \$564,500 was provided by Webster Township, \$366,850 from landowners, and \$2.07 million from the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program.

"The Greenbelt Program has been accomplishing its mission, and it's kind of into a golden time right now because a very large percentage of the federal monies that come to Michigan come here because we're the people with the program with matching funds," said Ann Arbor Mayor John Hieftje, who was the public leader of the campaign seven years ago to start the program. "It's been a whole lot of success, and I look forward to the next few years particularly."

The Greenbelt Program was approved by Ann Arbor voters in November 2003 - at a time when a significant amount of development activity was occurring around Washtenaw County, and farmland was being sold for development.

Voters authorized a 0.5-mill tax for 30 years, which provides funds for parkland acquisition within the city and the preservation of open space, agricultural

land, and other natural habitats outside the city in a designated Greenbelt district (see map).

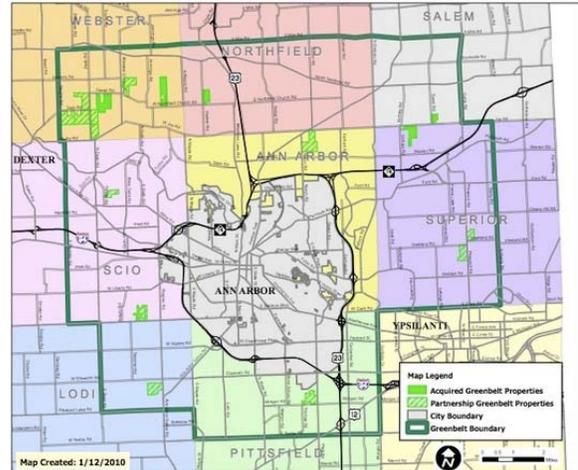
Hieftje points out the Greenbelt millage wasn't a new tax when it was approved in 2003. The city had a land acquisition millage off and on dating back to the 1980s, and it was extended a couple years before it would have expired.

The millage - officially called the Open Space and Parkland Preservation millage - brought in \$2.2 million in revenues from city taxpayers last fiscal year. An income statement obtained by AnnArbor.com shows expenses totaled \$4.26 million, while revenues - factoring in grants and investment income - totaled \$3.73 million. The program ended the year with a fund balance of \$17.1 million - \$10.23 million from the millage and \$6.9 million from bond proceeds.

About \$1.2 million went toward debt service for bonds, while \$2.6 million was spent on Greenbelt projects and \$237,444 on park projects. Another \$184,924 was paid out in administrative expenses, \$139,443 of which went to The Conservation Fund.

City Council Member Carsten Hohnke, a member of the Greenbelt Advisory Commission, said lower land prices and more matching funds are helping city dollars go further than ever before through the Greenbelt Program.

"The market place is much different - there aren't a whole lot of developers looking for farmland - and so we've seen the price per acre for the development rights come down by about half," Hohnke said. "And so we're actually protecting a lot more land than we expected."



A view of the two silos on the Nixon farm from behind the broken boards of an old barn on the property. (Photo by Ryan J. Stanton | AnnArbor.com)

Last November, Webster Township residents voted to continue their support of preserving farmland and open space, township Supervisor John Kingsley noted. He said the township looks forward to working with the city and other partners to preserve even more land in the future.

The city of Ann Arbor originally estimated it would cost \$617,257 to acquire 75 acres of property behind the Webster United Church of Christ, about half of which would be funded through a federal land protection program. But when federal grants were denied, the church was willing to donate additional acreage for free and Webster

Township kicked in a contribution of \$77,000.

A historic marker standing in front of the white building indicates the church traces its roots to the 1830s. While the congregation agreed to make 94.4 acres untouchable, Kulp said the church kept the development rights to land immediately surrounding the building. The church is considering using

the money it was paid through the Greenbelt Program to complete a renovation or expansion in the future.

"The gain that we did get from the property, we've put it away and we have a meeting in January where we'll have some discussion," Kulp said. "We have additional property we can build upon - we didn't put all of the property into the Greenbelt."