

# ACTIVITY REPORT

## FISCAL YEAR 2008 - 2009

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ANN ARBOR OPEN SPACE AND PARKLAND  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM

PREPARED FOR:

THE CITY OF ANN ARBOR  
GREENBELT ADVISORY COMMISSION  
PARKLAND ADVISORY COMMISSION

PREPARED BY:

THE CONSERVATION FUND

*America's Partner in Conservation*



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# ACTIVITY REPORT

## FISCAL YEAR 2008 - 2009

ANN ARBOR OPEN SPACE AND PARKLAND PRESERVATION PROGRAM

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The City of Ann Arbor residents are fortunate enough to not only have a vibrant park system, but to also have open space surrounding the city that provides scenic vistas and attracts folks to this area. In 2003, residents had the insight to pass the Open Space and Parkland Preservation Millage, commonly referred to the Parks and Greenbelt program. Money is generated through this tax levy is used to purchase parkland within the City, as well as, to protect farmland, open spaces and natural areas within portions of 8 Townships surrounding Ann Arbor, known as the Greenbelt District. The purpose of the initiative is to preserve open space, natural habitats, farmland, and the City's source waters inside and outside the city limits.

Since the passage of the millage, the City has purchased an additional 40 acres of parkland. These parcels have added critical parcels to existing parkland, protected critical natural areas remaining in the City, and provided linkages between parks, increasing the viability of the overall park system. Outside of the City, the millage has helped to protect over 1320 acres of working farmland and open space outside of the City. Protecting farmland provides many benefits to the Ann Arbor residents by protecting the rural, scenic vistas, local agricultural economy, as well as providing habitat for wildlife.

Since 2003, Ann Arbor, Webster and Scio Townships located within the Greenbelt District have also passed similar millages, providing opportunities for the Greenbelt to leverage city funds and collaborate with other jurisdictions on land preservation. Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation also has funds for the purchase of high quality natural areas, and have partnered with the City Greenbelt on several transactions.

# GREENBELT

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## LAND PROTECTION

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### STRATEGIC DIRECTION

As outlined in the Greenbelt's Strategic Plan, which was originally adopted in 2005, the program has focused on forming large blocks of protected farmland and open space through the acquisition of easements, as well as protecting land along the Huron River. The Greenbelt identified 5 areas to concentrate acquisitions within the Greenbelt District to form these large blocks of protected land. The Commission continues to use the Strategic Plan to guide recommendations to Council on land acquisition.

Over the last 2 years, however, the City of Ann Arbor has witnessed changes within the local economy and a significant downturn in the local real estate market, which has had an effect on the Greenbelt Program. The downturn in the market has resulted in fewer developers buying land in the area and an increase in properties on the market and properties remaining on the market for a longer period of time. Ultimately, this has equated to appraised values for development rights decreasing from an average of \$16,000 / acre to \$8,000 / acre.

The Greenbelt Advisory Commission modified the Strategic plan in 2008 to also include language in favor of supporting small farms / local food farms. To date, the Greenbelt has focused on larger farms – 40 acres or great – that were eligible for Farm and Ranch Land Protection (FRPP) grant funding. The Greenbelt is exploring ways that the program may also support smaller farms that are producing for the direct market in the Ann Arbor area.

### LAND ACQUISITIONS

To date, the Greenbelt Program has helped to protect 1320 acres on working farms and natural areas. These properties have a total fair market value of \$19.6 million, with a cost to the Ann Arbor taxpayers of \$10.1 million. Thus, the City has contributed roughly 50% of the purchase price.

During the 2008-2009 fiscal year, the Greenbelt completed 4 acquisitions, for a total of . First, the Greenbelt collaborated with Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation and Scio Township for the purchase of 6 parcels in Scio Township. The property is a high quality woodland and is owned and managed by the Washtenaw County Parks.

The Greenbelt also protected 3 working farms – one in Pittsfield Township, and two in Webster Township. All the easements were purchased with grant funding from FRPP, in addition to other sources of local match, as detailed below.

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## LEVERAGING FUNDS

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### FRPP FUNDS RECEIVED

For the 2009 grant cycle, the City was awarded \$1,030,500 toward the purchase of development rights on the William and Cherie Nixon Farm in Webster Township. The Nixon farm is ideally located adjacent to two protected farms – the Smyth and Merkel / Heller farm.

Since 2005, the City has secured over \$5 million from the FRPP program. The City has also partnered with other local agencies within the Greenbelt District, which also received FRPP grant funds.

### LOCAL MONEY LEVERAGED

In November 2008, the Greenbelt Program partnered with the City's Solid Waste Department to protect 90 acres of the Walter Hilton estate in Pittsfield Township. In addition, Pittsfield Township was awarded a State and a USDA Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program grant for the purchase of development rights on the property. The property is adjacent to the City's composting center and the Solid Waste Department also purchase 52 acres of the property for future expansion of the site.

In January of 2009, the City of Ann Arbor contributed funds toward the purchase of 6 adjacent parcels (90 acres) in Scio Township. The County's Natural Areas Preservation Program identified the parcels as high priority for acquisition, and collectively, the parcels contain high quality woodlands. The county was the lead agency on the purchase and owns and manages the site. The property will remain a natural area with hiking trails and a small parking lot for access to the site. The City contributed \$350,000 or 16% of the overall purchase price, Scio Township contributed 10%, and the county contributed the remainder of the funds.

In May 2009 Webster Township and the City partnered on the protection of two adjacent properties – the Smyth farm and the Merkel / Heller farm. The Township received grant from FRPP for PDR on the Smyth farm to cover 50% of the purchase price. The City and Webster Township each contributed 25% to cover the remainder of the purchase price. The City received a grant from FRPP for the Merkel / Heller farm to cover 50% of the purchase price. Again the City and Township partnered on the PDR on the farm, with the Township covering \$110,000, or 8%.

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## LANDOWNER OUTREACH

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Due to the local economic and real estate markets, the City has experienced an increase in applications over the last 2 years. As such, no landowner forums were organized for this year. We expect to send out a round of applications in preparation for the 2010 FRPP application cycle.

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## PRESERVE WASHTENAW

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Preserve Washtenaw is a collaborative group consisting of public agencies and private organizations in Washtenaw County, focused on land preservation. Preserve Washtenaw has informally been meeting for over 3 years, and this past year formed a charter to solidify communication among the groups. The City is an active member of Preserve Washtenaw. The purpose of Preserve Washtenaw is to serve as a coordinating body for ongoing public and private land protection efforts, ensuring the highest possible level of cooperation and communication, and least possible amount of duplication and overlap. The group also hopes to provide a virtual single point of entry for landowners interested in land protection and/or stewardship to reduce confusion for landowners. The partners include Washtenaw Land Trust, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Natural Area Program, Raisin Valley Land Trust, Washtenaw Land Trust, Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy, Ann Arbor Township, Webster Township, Pittsfield Township, Scio Township, The City of Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County Planning and Environment.

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## FINANCIAL SPREADSHEET

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See Appendix A for details.

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## STATUS OF GOALS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2008 – 2009

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- Leverage Greenbelt funds by Applying for FRPP funds on 3 properties.
  - THE GREENBELT APPLIED FOR GRANTS ON 4 PROPERTIES AND RECEIVED FUNDING FOR 1 OF THE PROPERTIES.
- As part of the Greenbelt's ongoing discussions of value and the real estate market, release a Request for Proposals to be sent to developers and bankers who own property within the Greenbelt District in order for them to submit a price / acre bid if they wish to sell their property to the City's Greenbelt.

- THE REQUEST FOR BIDS WAS RELEASED IN xxxxx 2008. THE GREENBELT RECEIVED 14 RESONSES AND IS CURRENTLY WORKING WITH PARTNERS ON THE POTENTIAL ACQUISITION OF 3 OF THOSE PROPERTIES.
- Leverage Greenbelt funds by Collaborating with Townships and County on applications.
  - THIS FISCAL YEAR THE CITY COMPLETED 4 DEALS, ALL OF WHICH WERE COMPLETED WITH PARTNERS. THE OPEN ROADS PURCHASE IN SCIO TOWNSHIP WAS IN COLLABORATINO WITH THE COUNTY AND SCIO TOWNSHIP; HILTON PURCHASE OF DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS WAS COMPLETED WITH THE HELP OF PITTSFIELD TOWNSHIP, STATE AND FEDERAL GRANTS, AND BOHT THE MERKEL AND SMYTH PDR WERE COMPLETED WITH FEDERAL GRANTS AND IN COLLABORATION WITH WEBSTER TOWNSHIP.
- Close on 4 new properties.
  - THE GREENBELT COMPLETED 4 TRANSACTIONS – ONE IN SCIO TOWNSHIP, TWO IN WEBSTER TOWNSHIP AND ONE IN PITTSFIELD TOWNSHIP.
- Obtain at least 25% matching funds on all transactions from sources including local government, state government, federal government and landowner contributions.
  - THE MATCHING FUNDS RANGED FROM 40% TO 84% WITH A CUMULATIVE AVERAGE OF 64% FOR THE FISCAL YEAR.
- Continue to explore ways to tangibly connect Ann Arbor taxpayers with the Greenbelt program, including but not limited to newsletters, events, and a Small Farms Initiative with Ann Arbor Township.
  - THE GREENBELT HAS CONTINUED TO EXPLORE WAYS TO SUPPORT SMALL FARMS AND LOCAL FOODS AND HAS BEEN REVISING THE EASEMENT LANGUAGE TO ADD PROVISIONS FOR THE SPECIFIC TYPES OF AGRICULTURE.

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### GOALS FOR 2009 - 2010

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- Apply for FRPP funds on at least 3 properties.
- Close on at least 5 properties.
- Complete 1,000 acre block for Webster Township.
- Obtain at least 20% matching fund on all transactions from local governments, state government, federal grants or landowner donations.

# PARK LAND ACQUISITIONS

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## STRATEGIC DIRECTION

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During the last fiscal year, the Park Advisory Commission and staff utilized GIS to embark on a Strategic Planning process for parkland acquisitions. Through GIS, vacant parcels were identified and ranked based on their suitability for acquisition as a park. Separate ranking schema was developed for each of the four types of parks – neighborhood parks, community / active recreation parks, urban parks, and natural areas. The goal of this process is to provide a strategic approach to ensure the viability of the City's park system.

Through the strategic planning process, using GIS, staff was able to identify underserved neighborhoods. In an ideal system, every household should be within walking distance (¼ mile) of a neighborhood park (City of Ann Arbor PROS Plan F6). By using functions of GIS, the housing units not within walking distance of an existing neighborhood park were identified. This helps to ensure adequate access to the park system for all neighborhoods.

This fiscal year, the Parks Advisory Commission began to build on the GIS study and identify specific parcels that are priority for future acquisitions, as well as broader priorities for the park system. These priorities will be further refined as part of the update process for the update of the PROS Plan.

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## LAND PROTECTION

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The City, in partnership with Scio Township completed the purchase of a Conservation Easement on the Botsford Property. The property contains high quality natural features including oak-hickory forest that covers most of the hilly terrain on the site. Wildflower flora is diverse and dense, with few areas lacking groundcover. The woods provide habitat for wood thrush and scarlet tanager, which both need large forested areas for nesting. Two small perennial streams are present on the southeast portion of the site. The rare small tree wahoo (*Euonymus atropurpurea*) is located along the stream at the western edge of the property. Small wetlands occur along the stream channels where topography is relatively level. These areas occupy a minor part of the site and have less botanical diversity than the uplands, but together with the uplands they contribute to the overall complexity and diversity of the site. Public access is allowed on the site for the public to enjoy the trails.

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## FINANCIAL SPREADSHEET

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See Appendix A for details.



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## STATUS OF GOALS FOR 2008 – 2009

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- Complete 1-2 land acquisitions including at least one donation.
  - THE CITY COMPLETED THE PURCHASE OF A CONSERVATION EASEMENT ON 10-ACRE IN SCIO TOWNSHIP IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE TOWNSHIP.
  - FOUR OTHER TRANSACTIONS ARE IN THE PROCESS AND EXPECT TO CLOSE DURING THE NEXT FISCAL YEAR.
- Complete rezoning and annexation of 30 parks that were acquired but have not been annexed into the City or rezoned to public land.
  - THE REZONING OF ALL PARK LAND TO PUBLIC LAND HAS BEEN COMPLETED. IN ADDITION, ALL THE PARKS THAT HAD BEEN TOWNSHIP ISLANDS ARE IN THE PROCESS OF BEING ANNEXED INTO THE CITY.

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## GOALS FOR 2009 - 2010

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- Complete 1 – 2 transactions, including one donation.
- Update priorities for future land acquisitions.

# APPENDICES

Appendix A: Financial Report

Appendix B: Compilation of news articles

**Appendix A: Fiscal Year 2008-2009 Financial Report**

