



# **CITY OF ANN ARBOR GREENBELT PROGRAM: STRATEGIC PLAN**

**REVISED 2019**

**Approved by:**  
Greenbelt Advisory Commission  
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**Prepared for:**  
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— THE —  
**CONSERVATION FUND**



## HISTORY

The Open Space and Parkland Preservation Millage (aka Greenbelt) started with a grand vision overwhelmingly supported by Ann Arbor voters, who in 2003 approved a 30-year, 0.5 mil tax levy with 67% of the vote. The millage funds both new parkland acquisitions within the City limits, as well as land preservation outside of the City but within the Greenbelt District (Figure 1).

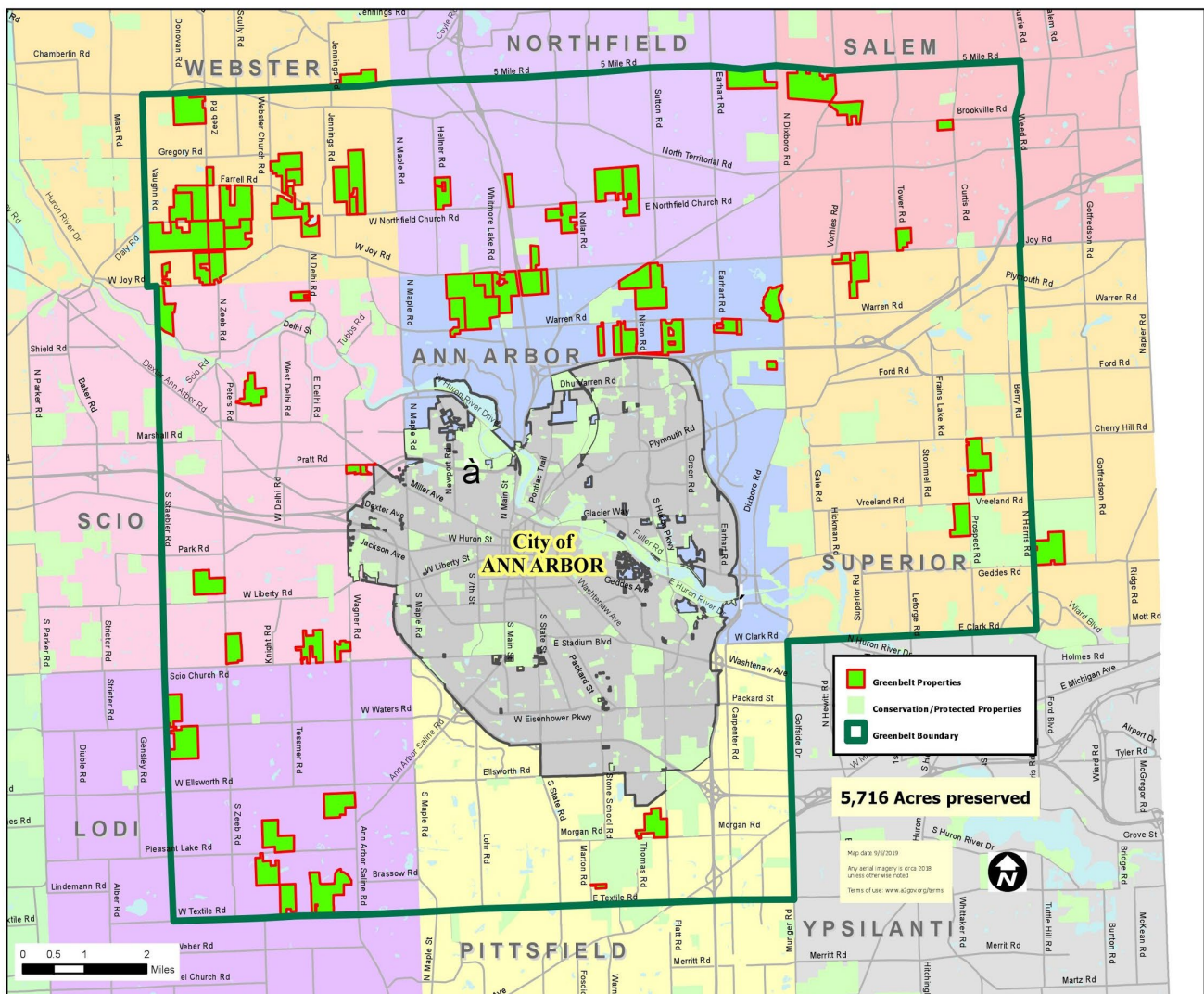


Figure 1. A map of the City's Greenbelt District and preserved land as of October 2019.



## STRUCTURE

As delineated in City Council Resolution 377-9-03, one-third of the millage revenue is dedicated for parkland acquisition within the City, and two-thirds of millage revenue is dedicated for land preservation within the Greenbelt District outside the City (Figure 2). [Chapter 42 \(Open Space and Parkland Preservation Ordinance\)](#) of the City Code provides the parameters for the use of Open Space and Parkland Preservation Millage funds. Chapter 42 establishes the Greenbelt Advisory Commission, charged with making recommendations to City Council on the use of Open Space and Parkland Preservation Millage funds within the Greenbelt District, known as the City’s Ann Arbor Greenbelt Program. Within the City limits, the Parks Advisory Commission is tasked with making recommendations to City Council on the use of those millage funds for parkland acquisitions, overseen by the City’s Parks and Recreation Department.

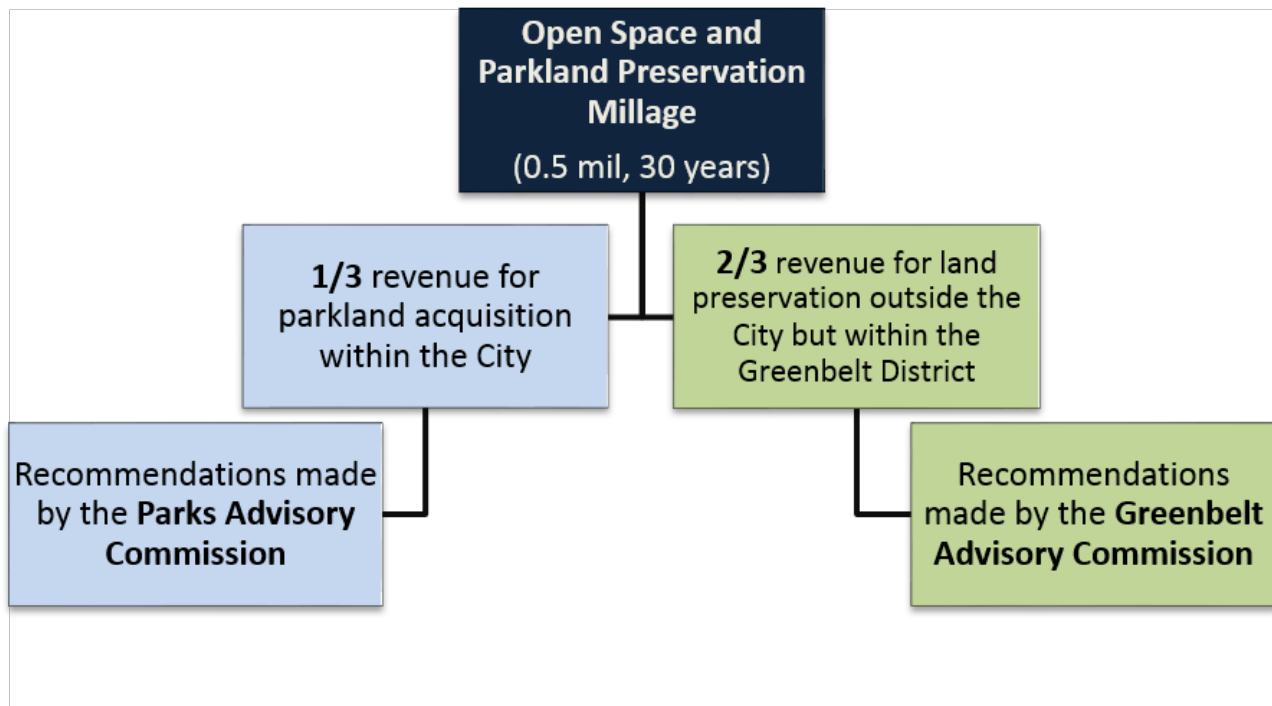


Figure 2. Breakdown of the Open Space and Parkland Preservation Millage revenue.



## MECHANISMS

Land preservation takes two primary forms:

### 1. Fee Simple Ownership

- Where an entity, such as the City of Ann Arbor or Washtenaw County, owns land outright, usually for the primary purpose of public recreation

### 2. Purchase of Development Rights

- Where an entity, such as the City of Ann Arbor, secures a voluntary and perpetual contract with a private landowner to restrict the current and future potential for development, providing public benefits without requiring public ownership

The majority of the Greenbelt Program's work has been accomplished through the purchase of development rights, and through partnerships establishing publicly accessible recreation lands. Purchasing development rights is a cost effective approach that keeps land in private ownership, and on the tax rolls, while also ensuring the land is preserved in perpetuity.

By purchasing the development rights the City is able to accomplish land preservation goals at a fraction of the market costs. For instance, the total fair market value of the land preserved by the Greenbelt Program is over \$64 million. However, the development rights associated with that same land is valued at only \$49 million, and through strategic partnership and grants, the City taxpayers have only paid \$23 million to obtain that \$64 million worth of land preserved (Figure 3), with the remaining value contributed by partners.

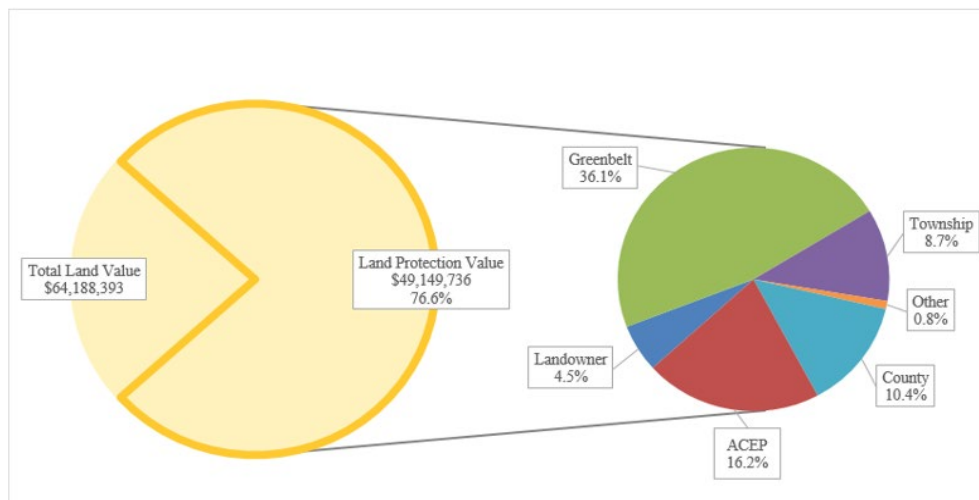


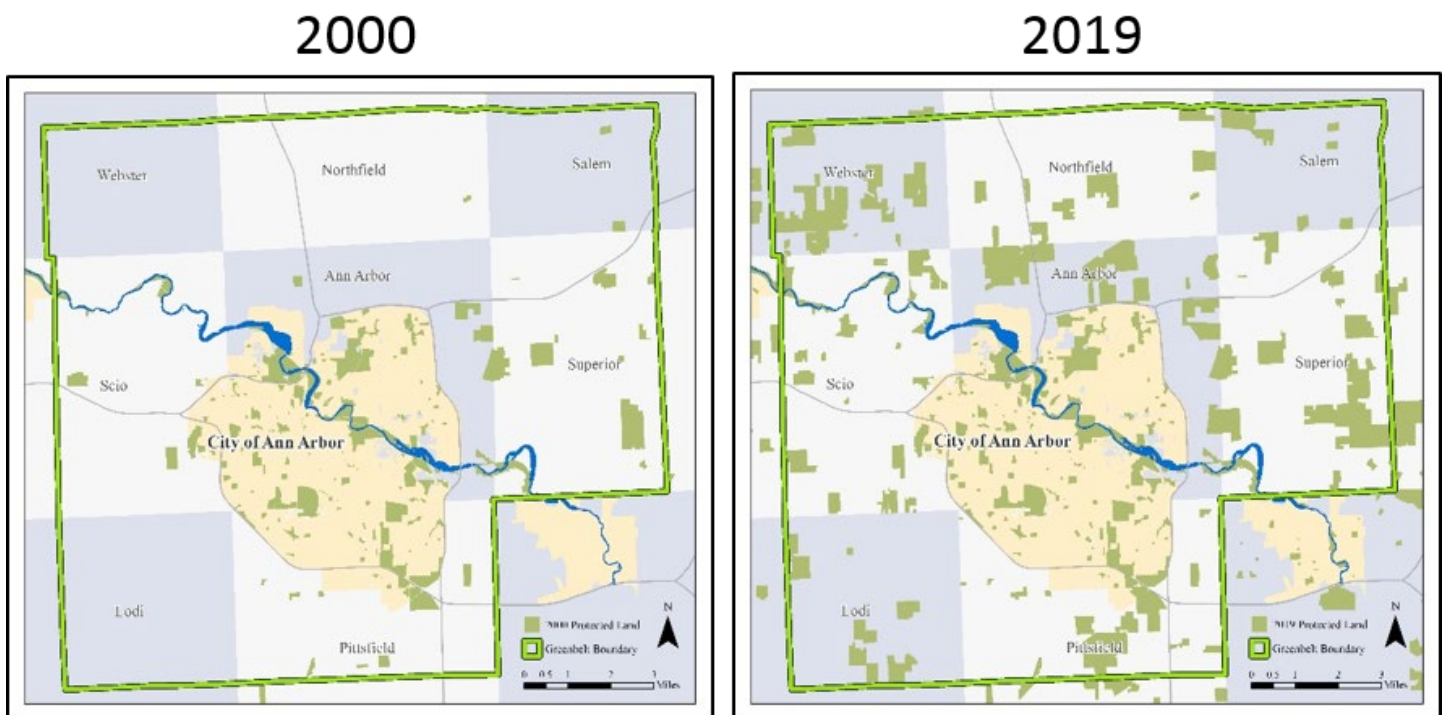
Figure 3. Financial breakdown of land preserved through the Greenbelt Program





## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The impact of the Greenbelt Program on the regional landscape has been substantial. Over the first 15 years of the Greenbelt Program, 5,716 acres of preserved land have been protected within the Greenbelt District (Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Map of preserved lands in the year 2000 compared to present day (October 2019)*

The Greenbelt Program’s impact can be broken down into three primary categories:

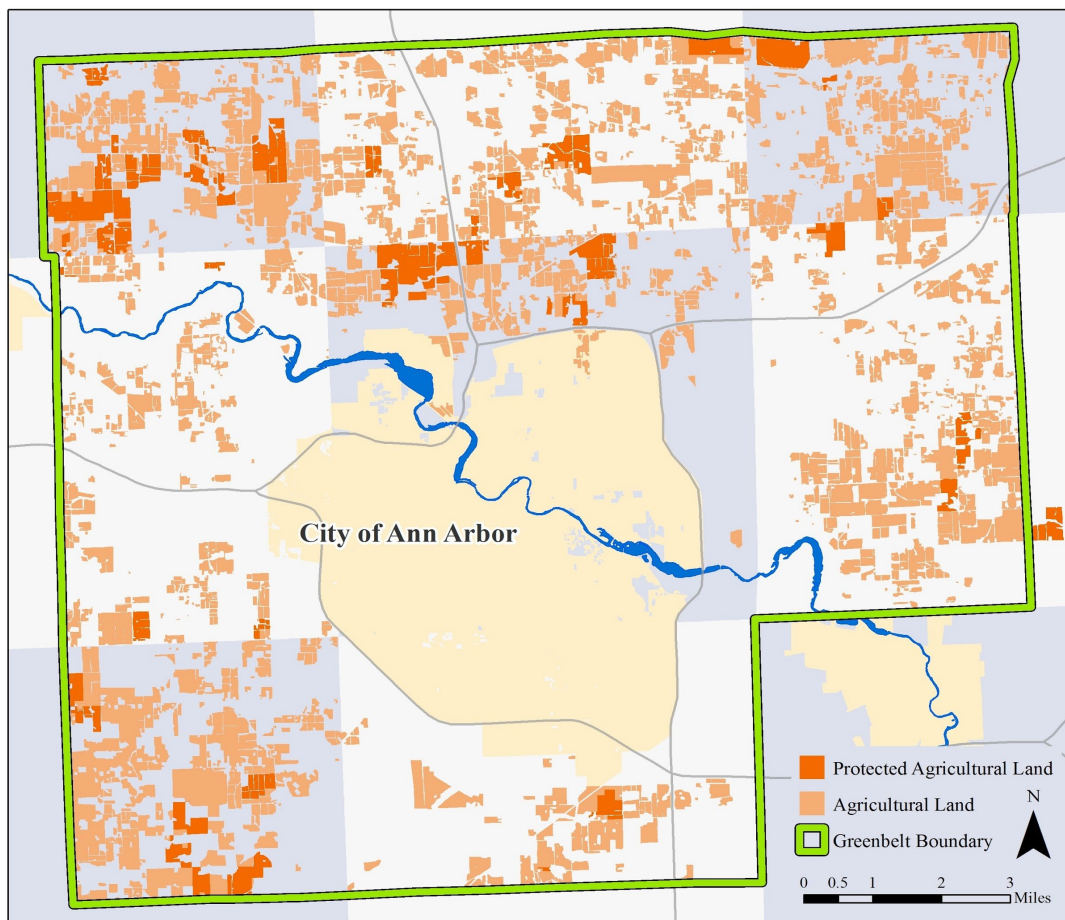
1. Protecting farmland and farming
2. Protecting waters
3. Protecting open space and biodiversity

### PROTECTING FARMLAND AND FARMING

Since 1935, Washtenaw County has lost 223,785 acres of farmland. Since 2007, Michigan averaged losses of 2 acres every hour or 2 farms each day. Within 10 years, approximately 35% of all Michigan farmers will retire. While the impacts to the region’s farming landscape and culture have been significant, the Greenbelt Program has helped preserve and promote what farms and farming remains.



The Greenbelt Program has preserved over 5,700 acres to date. As the Greenbelt District (excluding the City) encompasses over 87,500 acres, the Greenbelt Program’s work to preserve 5,700 acres (6.5% of the Greenbelt District) may seem relatively small. However, it is important to look at the characteristics of the landscape. Approximately 24,400 acres of the Greenbelt District is currently in active agricultural production, and the Greenbelt Program has preserved over 3,700 acres of active farmland. This means over 15% of the currently available farmland within the Greenbelt District has been preserved (Figure 5), only halfway through the 30-year millage.



*Figure 5. Map of active farmland in the Greenbelt District, and active farmland preserved by the Greenbelt Program*



By preserving the most fundamental piece of the farming equation, the land itself, the Greenbelt Program has helped ensure that over 3,700 acres of farmland will be available for future generations, and be available to serve local markets as the economics and practices of farming change over the decades and centuries to come. So, while the Greenbelt Program has protected 53 working farms, and currently only five of those farms source food to local markets, the Greenbelt Program has guaranteed the land base for future local food systems to emerge upon. That land base has the potential to produce enough food to feed over 55,000 people each year.

Beyond the land itself, there are social stressors that are barriers to success in farming. The number one challenge for new and beginning farmers in the United States is finding affordable farmland. Through the Greenbelt Program’s work to purchase the development rights, which reduces the cost of purchasing agricultural land, six new farmers have been able to secure affordable land. For example, the Greenbelt Program partnered with Ann Arbor Township to protect a property that was later purchased by Nate and Jill Lada, owners and operators of Green Things Farm (Figure 6), who source vegetables, flowers and pasture-raised meats to local Ann Arbor markets.



*Figure 6. Jill Lada of Green Things Farm. Take a virtual tour of the property [here](#).*





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## **PROTECTING WATERS**

The original 2003 ballot language clearly stated the protection of the City’s source water was a primary goal of the Open Space and Parkland Preservation millage: *“for the purpose of preserving and protecting open space, natural habitats and the City’s source waters.”* To date, the Greenbelt Program has had a significant impact on preserving water quality in our region.

The Michigan Department of Energy, Great Lakes and Environment (EGLE)’s Conservation Easement Load Reduction Calculator is a tool that estimates the total pollutant runoff avoided by preserving lands in their current form. When the lands preserved by the Greenbelt Program are entered into the tool, it is estimated that the Greenbelt Program’s work has stopped over 299,000 lbs/year of total suspended solids, 9,100 lbs/year of nitrogen, 1,400 lbs/year of phosphorous from entering our local waterways each year every year, forever. By keeping the green infrastructure in our region intact, these natural landscapes play a crucial role in the capture and filtration of water entering our stream system.

In all, the Greenbelt Program has protected over 28 miles of river, stream and waterway frontage, and 60% of those waterways are within the Huron River Watershed, contributing to the filtration and protection of the City’s drinking water.



*Figure 7. The Huron River flowing southeast into the City of Ann Arbor*





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## **PROTECTING OPEN SPACE AND BIODIVERSITY**

Opportunities for recreation are critical for a region’s quality of life. Preservation of contiguous woodlands, wetlands and diverse habitats not only helps sequester carbon, but provides the refuge for biodiversity to thrive.

The Greenbelt Program has helped establish 10 new public nature preserves within the Greenbelt District, including:

- Fox Science Preserve, 69 acres – Owned and managed by Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission
- Meyer Preserve, 140 acres – Owned and managed by Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission
- Scio Woods Preserve, 90 acres – Owned and managed by Scio Township
- Northfield Woods Preserve, 55 acres – Owned and managed by Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission
- VanCurler Preserve, 90 acres – Owned and managed by Scio Township
- Dominican Meadows Preserve, 81 acres – Owned and managed by Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission
- Landsberg Preserve, 81 acres – Owned and managed by Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission
- Pringle Property, 18 acres – Owned and managed by Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission
- Shatter Family Preserve, 25 acres – Owned and managed by Legacy Land Conservancy



*Figure 8. Scio Woods Preserve, 90 acres. Preserved with Greenbelt Program assistance.*



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## **STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS**

In 2019, after celebrating the successes of the first 15 years of the program, the Greenbelt Advisory Commission (GAC) led a review of the program’s strategic plan. Originally drafted in 2006, and reviewed in 2013, the previous strategic plan guided the GAC’s overall priorities with an emphasis on building vibrant blocks of farmland within priority areas, preserving land along the Huron River, and leveraging funds from partner organizations. The new strategic planning process was designed to (1) clearly articulate the impact of the first 15 years of the program, (2) develop a collective vision for the next ten years, and (3) engage the community in identifying strategic opportunities to improve the impact of the program moving forward.

Over approximately six months, and with the support of external firm Bridgeport Consulting, Greenbelt staff and members of the GAC conducted a mixed method approach to stakeholder engagement, including:

- Four facilitated public engagement sessions with a total of 43 attendees,
- A written survey completed by 40 engagement session attendees (see appendix for a summary of findings),
- Two public GAC meetings attended by 8 members of the public,
- A series of presentations and conversations with 3 townships in the Greenbelt District, and
- Website and email solicitation of written feedback from 10 members of the public, 4 townships, and the Washtenaw County Food Council.

The team preceded their stakeholder engagement process with a review of the community survey within the 2018 Impact Study conducted by students and faculty at the University of Michigan’s School for Environment and Sustainability “Measuring Impact: Evaluating the Ecological, Social, and Economic Services of the City of Ann Arbor Greenbelt Program” – available online [here](#).



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## KEY FINDINGS

Taken in aggregate, the stakeholder engagement efforts illuminated the following key findings:

- 1. The Greenbelt is well-supported, but not always well-understood.** Survey responses from 36 public engagement session participants rated the “Greenbelt’s performance to date” as 3.48 on a 4.0 scale with 94% responding either “good” or “great.” Representative comments from public letters highlight the program’s support:

*“The Ann Arbor Greenbelt is a treasure.”*

*“As an Ann Arbor resident, I am pleased to see my tax dollars put to this worthy use.”*

*“I love what you’re doing. Keep up the good work.”*

*“Please continue to prioritize the Ann Arbor Greenbelt as a way to bring federal dollars to your region, as a way to support the quiet, but very important agricultural industries in your region, and for the greenbelt’s environmental benefits”.*

A 2018 impact study by students and faculty from the University of Michigan found that Ann Arbor homeowners place high value on local farming and preservation of open space, and feel the benefits of the Greenbelt outweigh its costs. However, the same study found that only 32% of survey respondents felt knowledgeable about the Greenbelt.

Attendees at the 2019 public engagement sessions also identified a lack of awareness of the Greenbelt program as one of their top three concerns. Likewise, one of the top three strategies prioritized by the participants was outreach and education to increase awareness of the Greenbelt among both the general public and land owners who are eligible to participate in the program.

- 2. There is broad support for identifying and preserving the highest quality parcels to protect quality soils and critical habitats in perpetuity.** This type of “parcel-level” prioritization was the most frequently cited response when public engagement session participants were asked to name the single “most important Greenbelt strategy.” Parcel-level prioritization, paired with direct outreach to landowners, is a core strategy





for townships in the Greenbelt region with Ann Arbor, Pittsfield, Scio, and Webster Townships all identifying this as a central approach for future acquisitions.

- 3. Local food is a high priority, but there is not consensus for mandating selected farming practices.** Throughout the public engagement sessions, discussions included rich conversations about the value of local food and the perceived advantages and challenges of prioritizing certain farming practices over others. There is undoubtedly a strong appreciation for local food within our community and this theme came through in the University of Michigan impact study, the public session discussions and the engagement survey. However, many participants noted that imposing restrictions on the farming practices of Greenbelt-protected farms would run the risk of (1) violating Michigan’s Right to Farm Act, (2) discouraging potential program participants, (3) imposing untenable expenses for the Greenbelt program administrators (who would be required to “police” compliance).

During public comments at the September GAC meeting, a representative of the Washtenaw County Food Council proposed an approach that would allow the Greenbelt to support future local food production while avoiding the risks of imposing direct restrictions on farming practices. The Council recommends that the GAC consider scoring mechanisms that will support the preservation of small-acreage plots, stating that *“beginning farmers often seek small acreage plots close to the urban center for two reasons - off-farm income is critical for a beginning farmer’s success and they are most successful when they start small and grow their production over time.”*

- 4. There is broad support for regional collaboration to increase impact and efficiency and encourage alignment with local sustainability, climate, and equity goals.** Regional collaboration was a prominent theme of the public engagement sessions, with many local conservation experts and long-time Greenbelt supporters recalling the previous efforts of a group called “Preserve Washtenaw” which was formed to help facilitate partnerships and landscape-level coordination among government and nonprofit preservation programs in Washtenaw County. “Preserve Washtenaw” later dissolved due to a lack of leadership among the partners. Public session attendees identified reestablishing “Preserve Washtenaw”, or another similar effort, as one of the top three most important strategies for Greenbelt success and many spoke of the value of



coordination not only at the level of land preservation, but also integration with area climate change and health equity goals. Additionally, representatives from adjacent municipalities expressed the value of aligning Greenbelt strategies and acquisitions more closely with townships' open space development plans and related community priorities. All saw opportunities for enhanced mutual benefit with an investment in well-supported proactive, collaborative, regional planning.

## **MISSION**

The Greenbelt Program has a simple, yet powerful, mission:

*To protect, in perpetuity, rural lands and habitats in and around Ann Arbor, including farms and natural areas.*

Once protected, these lands support future biodiversity, local food production, and ultimately, a healthier community.

## **OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

*To support a high quality of life, with fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink, sustainable productivity of soils, and a diverse, local food system for dietary choices and overall health, we envision...*

- 1. Large swaths of contiguous protected land** support healthy biodiversity in the regional ecosystem which provides wildlife corridors, protects our water resources, supports pollution breakdown and absorption, fortifies our defenses against natural disasters, and strengthens natural sustainability.
- 2. A flourishing agricultural region** that is valued for its rich soil and innovative farming practices which provides the next generation of farmers with access to affordable land, enables small farms and local food production, protects high-quality nutrient-rich soils, offers beautiful views when driving or biking along area roadways, and preserves long-term viability our agricultural economy.
- 3. The Greenbelt is well-understood and supported throughout the region** which enhances opportunities for people to appreciate and use vibrant natural spaces, highlights the economic and environmental value of preserving soil quality and



biodiversity, and results in community and political will to build upon the Greenbelt's successes.

4. **A well-supported vision for regional sustainability is actualized** with strong partnerships between the county, townships, land conservancies, and community, state, and federal agencies, aligned with regional health and equity goals, integrated with climate goals, and drawing support from foundations and other funders.
5. **Communities across the state and the nation look to the Ann Arbor Greenbelt as a benchmark model for similar initiatives.**

## **STRATEGIC PRIORITIES**

1. **Preserve: Preserve the highest quality lands with parcel level prioritization.**
  - 1.1. Prioritize soil quality and biodiversity.
  - 1.2. Align with the priorities of key partners in the county, townships, land conservancies, and community, state, and federal agencies.
  - 1.3. Include targeted outreach as part of the acquisition process.
2. **Educate: Build awareness of Greenbelt program impacts and priorities throughout Ann Arbor and the surrounding communities.**
  - 2.1. Educate on the successes of the Greenbelt's first 15 years and opportunities for future investments for the general public, and to enhance equitable access for all whom the program can serve.
  - 2.2. Communicate meaningful metrics on air/water/soil quality, social, cultural, and health impacts, and the economic value of biodiversity.
  - 2.3. Initiate community and partner conversations to explore most valuable investments or changes needed in future strategies.
3. **Collaborate: Actively participate in authentic cross-sector regional conservation collaboration.**
  - 3.1. Engage with county, townships, land conservancies, USDA-NRCS, and other partners.





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- 3.2. Secure creative funding streams to support quality parcel acquisition in areas with fewer resources.
  - 3.3. Align Greenbelt investments to support positive impact on city and township agricultural and open space plans and related community priorities.
4. **Align: Align Greenbelt acquisitions with water, climate, and health equity goals.**
    - 4.1. Prioritize water quality.
    - 4.2. Align with the City's Climate Action Plan, specifically the goals related to local food, healthy ecosystem, sustainable systems, and engaged community.
    - 4.3. Be aware of county, city, and townships health and equity goals in Greenbelt education and engagement activities, and prioritize parcels accordingly.

## CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

1. **Clearly articulate updated scoring criteria** - The guiding tool for Greenbelt prioritization of acquisitions is the scoring criteria. This tool must clarify the definition of quality to be used in parcel level prioritization and additional updated scoring criteria (e.g. social and economic benefit factors, local food system impacts, climate action plan impacts, alignment with equity imperatives, affected community priorities/goals). The additional scoring criteria must be effectively communicated to partners, landowners, and townships.
2. **Enhance quality data about impact** - There is significant value in securing more sophisticated analysis of impacts on soil, air, and water quality, and the social and economic benefits of Greenbelt investments. There is limited to no capacity within the current millage for this additional "back end" work. Leveraging existing data and methodologies (e.g., Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Natural Areas Preservation Program) and strategic, mutually beneficial partnerships with universities could provide valuable data analysis with relatively low resource investment.
3. **Leverage existing and secure additional resources for engagement, education, and outreach** - Many in our community are unfamiliar with what one member of the public described as the "unsung success story" of the Greenbelt. While education and outreach were named in the previous strategic plan, it has been challenging to devote resources



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to this effort. The strategic planning process has resulted in new communications ideas and opportunities, some of which can be accomplished at a relatively low cost via social media (e.g., Nextdoor and Facebook), email blasts, and/or mass mailings to inform the public of Greenbelt successes and strategies. Additional effort will be needed to develop outreach approaches to reach farm owners regarding the benefits of the program.

- 4. Secure resources and capacity for cross-sector, regional conservation planning** - The community is seeking enhanced collaboration and integrated regional, cross sector conservation planning. Again, there is limited to no capacity for convening and guiding this work within the constraints of the current Greenbelt millage, which restricts administrative expenses to 6% of overall millage expenditures. Peer communities have addressed similar challenges by shifting over time from early millages that were dedicated to funding acquisitions to renewal millages incorporating a more robust operations and maintenance element. There may also be potential to generate financial and in-kind support via federal and state resources, foundations, universities, agency partners, and private citizens.