

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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