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Ann Arbor Greenbelt Eyes Future Land Deals

SE Michigan Land Conservancy partnership in Superior Greenway

By MARY MORGAN

Ann Arbor greenbelt advisory commission meeting (Nov. 9, 2011): Skyline High School students on class assignment outnumbered commissioners at Wednesday's meeting. More students might have attended, but some learned of a meeting of the city's medical marijuana advisory board scheduled for the same time, and were drawn to that instead.



Skyline High students get their attendance sheets signed by Dan Ezekiel, chair of the greenbelt advisory commission. Some students recognized Ezekiel from his other job – a science teacher at Forsythe Middle School.

Those who did stay witnessed a brief meeting that included a recess to wait until a sixth commissioner arrived – GAC requires six members to hold a closed session, which they needed in order to discuss possible land acquisition.

Briefly participating in that closed session was Jack Smiley, former executive director of the Southeast Michigan Land

Conservancy. The conservancy hopes to partner with Ann Arbor's greenbelt program on property in the Superior Greenway – land between Ann Arbor and Detroit that's protected from development.

In other business, commissioners briefly discussed ways to communicate better about the greenbelt program with the public, building on what they viewed as a successful bus tour of protected greenbelt land in October. One possibility is a forum this winter at the Ann Arbor District Library, where the public could meet with landowners whose property is part of the greenbelt.

The one action item at Wednesday's meeting was a vote to pre-authorize staff of The Conservation Fund, which manages the greenbelt program under contract with the city, to conduct appraisals for potential land acquisitions through Dec. 31.

Typically, GAC votes to authorize appraisals on specific parcels, as part of the application process that landowners make for being part of the greenbelt. But the city council is expected to vote on a possible expansion of greenbelt boundaries in December, after GAC's meeting that month. GAC voted to recommend the expansion at its September 2011 meeting. It's expected that some landowners within the expanded boundaries might want to apply for the

greenbelt, and a February deadline to seek matching federal dollars makes the timeline for getting appraisals shorter than usual. Pre-authorization gives staff flexibility to move forward with the process.

Commissioners are also awaiting finalization of Shannon Brines' appointment to GAC. The city council was expected to vote on his appointment at its Nov. 10 meeting. But the council postponed the vote to Nov. 21 – due to a procedural issue, not any substantive concern about his appointment.

Partnership with Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy

Jack Smiley, founder and former executive director of the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy, attended Wednesday's meeting and spoke to commissioners informally. He also addressed the group during public commentary, saying that he's now a volunteer with the conservancy's land protection committee. SMLC is excited about partnering with Ann Arbor's greenbelt program and Washtenaw County's natural areas preservation program, he said, to build what's known as the Superior Greenway.

Already, more than 1,800 acres have been protected between Ann Arbor and Detroit, Smiley said. There are some unique opportunities in the Ann Arbor greenbelt areas, he added, and he hopes the partnership will protect additional land in the future.

Before the meeting, Smiley had shown a map to GAC chair Dan Ezekiel and Ginny Trocchio, a Conservation Fund staff member who helps administer the greenbelt program. The map indicated a potential location for land preservation. Toward the end of its meeting, the commission entered into closed session to discuss possible land acquisition,

and Smiley was invited in for part of the session. When queried by The Chronicle about the location of the land, Smiley indicated that it was not information he wanted to make public at this point.



Greenbelt advisory commission chair Dan Ezekiel, left, talks with Jack Smiley, former executive director of the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy, before GAC's Nov. 10 meeting. They are looking at a map showing the location of land that might be preserved in partnership with the city and SMLC.

In response to Smiley's public commentary, Ezekiel noted that Ann Arbor had previously partnered with SMLC and Washtenaw County on the Meyer Preserve – two parcels on the southwest and northeast corners of Vreeland and Prospect Roads in Superior Township, near SMLC's LeFurge Woods Nature Preserve. Ezekiel said the parcel that might be preserved in the future through a partnership with SMLC would be located in an area within the greenbelt's expanded 2007 boundaries.

Ann Arbor's greenbelt program is funded by the Open Space and Parkland Preservation millage, which voters approved in 2003. Since then, the council has expanded the boundaries once, in August 2007, by bumping out the original boundary by a mile. [.pdf map of existing greenbelt district]

At its September 2011 meeting, GAC recommended expanding the boundaries again. The expansion would include “bump outs” in Lodi and Salem townships. It would also allow the city to acquire development rights on property adjacent to (but outside of) the greenbelt boundary, if it’s under the same ownership as an inside-the-boundary property that’s being considered for the program. These recommendations have not yet been approved by the city council – the council is now expected to vote on the issue in December. Previously, that vote had been expected at the second meeting in November.

Update: New Commissioner Appointment

Laura Rubin, a commissioner who’s also executive director of the Huron River Watershed Council, asked about the status of appointing Shannon Brines as a new GAC member. Ginny Trocchio reported that his nomination was on the agenda for city council’s Nov. 10 meeting. The council resolution is sponsored by Carsten Hohnke, a city councilmember who also serves on GAC. Hohnke did not attend Wednesday’s GAC meeting. [The council voted to postpone the appointment until Nov. 21. The resolution on the agenda would have made the effective date Nov. 21, and the council wanted to time their vote to the effective date.]

At its October 2011 meeting, GAC voted unanimously to recommend Brines for the appointment to fill the one open position, an at-large seat. For most city commissions, members are nominated by the mayor and confirmed by the council. However, greenbelt commissioners are both nominated and confirmed by the city council.

Brines is an Ann Arbor resident and owner of Brines Farm in Dexter, which is located outside of the city’s greenbelt boundary. He

is active in the local food movement, as a board member for Slow Food Huron Valley, and a steering committee member for the annual HomeGrown Festival, Local Food Summit, and the Tilian Farm Development Center, a farming business incubator project in Ann Arbor Township. He is a lecturer at the University of Michigan and manager of the environmental spatial analysis (ESA) lab at UM’s School of Natural Resources and Environment. Since 2007 he has served on the city’s public market advisory commission, which handles issues related to the farmers market. His current term on that commission ends in 2014.

Authorizing Appraisals

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, or FRPP, has set a February 2012 deadline to apply for the next round of grants, Trocchio told commissioners. The greenbelt program frequently seeks FRPP matching funds to offset costs of its land preservation efforts. In fiscal 2011, the greenbelt program received nearly \$2.8 million in FRPP funding.

Trocchio noted that there are some landowners in the potentially expanded greenbelt boundaries who are interested in applying to the greenbelt program. But since the city council won’t be voting on the boundaries until December, that leaves a tight timeframe to get all the necessary work done to apply for the FRPP grants, she said. Typically, GAC votes to authorize property appraisals of specific potential greenbelt acquisitions. But a council vote on the expanded boundaries won’t occur until after GAC’s December meeting, Trocchio noted.

Trocchio said she talked with GAC’s executive committee – chair Dan Ezekiel and vice chair Catherine Riseng – about how to handle this situation. One approach would

be for GAC to direct staff to make appraisals needed for FRPP grants, if the properties fit the greenbelt program's strategic goals. "The sooner we can get those started, the better off we are," she said.

Ezekiel clarified that it would essentially pre-authorize staff to start the appraisals. Trocchio noted that GAC could put an end date on the authorization, after which it would revert to the regular approval process. Liz Rother made a motion to grant the authorization, with an end date of Dec. 31.

In response to a query from Laura Rubin, Trocchio said that if an appraisal was started that GAC members later disagreed with, they could stop the process immediately at that point. Rubin asked how many applications Trocchio expected would need appraisals. "If we get three or four, that would be really exciting," Trocchio said. She estimated that appraisals cost between \$2,300 to \$2,500 each.

Outcome: The commission unanimously authorized staff to move forward with appraisals as needed without GAC approval, through Dec. 31.

Staff Report: Communications

During her staff report, Ginny Trocchio of The Conservation Fund said that the Oct. 22 greenbelt bus tour had been a success, with about 30 people attending. She said there was great feedback from people who took the tour, which visited several farms that are protected by the greenbelt program and provided an opportunity to talk with landowners who are participating in the program.

Trocchio said the commission has talked in the past about possible ways to communicate more with the public about the program. One idea is to hold an event at the downtown Ann Arbor District Library

building this winter, where landowners could discuss the greenbelt.

Saying that the bus tour sounded encouraging, Mike Garfield urged other commissions to think about additional ways they could publicize the greenbelt program. He noted that over the past several years, the program hasn't received much notice. With students in the audience, Wednesday's meeting was probably the largest crowd they've had in years, he said.

Garfield remembered how much attention the greenbelt program received when it was originally proposed and right after it was started, and he wondered how the city could reach out to the community again. Garfield suggested putting the topic on a future agenda, as an item for discussion.

Trocchio suggested that another possibility is to have a booth at the city's annual Green Fair, typically held in June. Dan Ezekiel voiced support for a session at the library, noting that they could bring in maps and photographs, essentially creating a virtual tour of the greenbelt.

New Meeting Date

GAC's current meeting time has posed a problem for some commissioners, and for the past few months they've discussed possible new dates for their monthly meetings, which now fall on the second Wednesday of each month at 4:30 p.m. For Dan Ezekiel and Catherine Rising – the commission's chair and vice chair – the current time requires them to leave faculty meetings related to their jobs.

After further discussion, the consensus among those who were present was that the first Thursday in the month, also at 4:30 p.m., was a preferable time. Two commissioners – Peter Allen and Carsten Hohnke – weren't present at Wednesday's

meeting, and no formal vote on the change was taken. The new dates, if approved at GAC's December meeting, would take effect in 2012.

Ezekiel noted that because the volume of GAC's work is decreasing, it's likely that meetings in future years will be relatively shorter.

Closed Session

Commissioners spent the last 45 minutes of their meeting in closed session to discuss possible land acquisitions. Jack Smiley of the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy was invited into the session briefly, staying about five minutes. The commission did not take any additional action when they emerged from closed session.

Present: Tom Bloomer, Dan Ezekiel, Mike Garfield, Catherine Riseng, Liz Rother, Laura Rubin. **Also:** Ginny Trocchio.

Absent: Peter Allen, Carsten Hohnke.

Next regular meeting: Wednesday, Dec. 14 at 4:30 p.m. in the second-floor council chambers at city hall, 301 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor.