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Greenbelt Boundary Expansion in the Works

Changes would affect Lodi, Salem townships

By MARY MORGAN

Ann Arbor greenbelt advisory commission meeting (Sept. 14, 2011): Boundaries of Ann Arbor's greenbelt program will expand in Lodi and Salem townships, if the city council approves a recommendation passed by the greenbelt advisory commission at its most recent meeting.



Ginny Trocchio of The Conservation Fund, which has a contract with the city to manage the greenbelt program. She's showing the greenbelt advisory commission a map of proposed boundary changes. (Photos by the writer.)

The recommendation also calls for allowing 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.

The recommended "bump-outs" in Lodi and Salem townships – in the southwest and northeast corners of the greenbelt, respectively – reflect increased support for the program from those townships. The Salem Township board, for example, recently voted to earmark \$200,000 annually for land preservation.

A separate resolution was voted down, with support only from the commission's chair, Dan Ezekiel. It would have recommended that the council consider properties adjacent to the greenbelt for acquisition, and create a one-mile buffer surrounding the current boundary. Properties within that buffer would have been considered for acquisition with greenbelt funds, but with stricter selection criteria.

Several commissioners were reluctant to increase the boundaries with a mile-wide buffer zone, citing concerns that land in that area is too far from Ann Arbor, and noting that opportunities for land preservation are still available within the existing greenbelt boundaries.

In other business, the commission got a review of the greenbelt program's finances

and activities for the 2011 fiscal year. A 30-year open space and parkland preservation millage, which voters approved in 2003, funds both the greenbelt program as well as land acquisition for parks. During the year, the greenbelt program spent \$8.3 million on 12 deals – by far the most transactions since the greenbelt’s inception.

Those 12 deals protect 1,472 acres of farmland from future development. In total, more than 3,200 acres are now part of the greenbelt. To put that into perspective, Ezekiel noted that those 3,200 acres are roughly equivalent to 80 parks the size of Veterans Memorial Park in Ann Arbor.

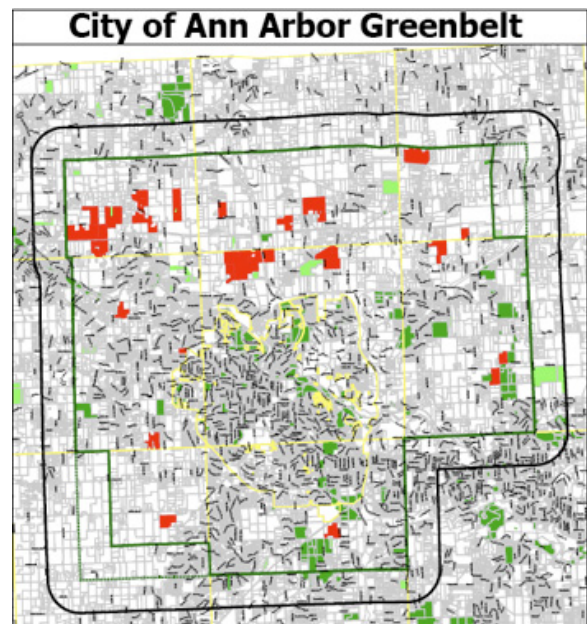
Three more greenbelt acquisitions were recommended by commissioners at the end of their meeting. The properties were identified only by application number – the location of the properties and their owners aren’t revealed until the resolutions are voted on by the city council.

Greenbelt Boundary Changes

The greenbelt advisory commission has been looking at possible expansion of boundaries for about a year. At their Nov. 10, 2010 meeting, commissioners voted to form a subcommittee – chaired by Dan Ezekiel – to explore the issue. At the time, a main reason to consider expansion was a opportunity to protect important parcels of land that fall just outside of the existing greenbelt boundary.

By way of background, in August 2007 the Ann Arbor city council expanded the greenbelt’s boundaries for the first time since the open space and parkland preservation millage was approved by voters in 2003. A summary of the ordinance for that expansion reads as follows:

Ordinance No. 26-07 amends Section 3:62(13) of Chapter 42, Open Space and Parkland Preservation of the City Code enlarging the boundaries of the Greenbelt District one mile to the west in both Webster and Scio Townships, one mile to the south in Pittsfield Township and one mile to the east in Superior Township and incorporates a new map of the boundaries, as revised, as part of Chapter 42.



Map of the Ann Arbor greenbelt. The solid green line indicates the current boundary. The dotted green lines in the lower left (Lodi Township) and upper right (Salem Township) indicate proposed "bump outs." The black line indicates a one-mile buffer zone, which was rejected by the greenbelt advisory commission. (Links to larger image.)

At Wednesday’s meeting, Ezekiel – who now chairs the commission – introduced the topic by saying it had been kicked around for a while, and he hoped they could reach some closure. He reviewed some history of the program, including the 2007 boundary change. He noted that two people instrumental in drawing the original greenbelt boundaries – Mike Garfield, who still serves on the commission, and former city councilmember Bob Johnson – had also been part of that 2007 boundary committee.

In considering these new boundary changes, Ezekiel said, the focus should be on what would make the best possible greenbelt, and how the city can give taxpayers the kind of program they thought they were voting for back in 2003.

Ginny Trocchio, a Conservation Fund staff member who helps administer the greenbelt program, brought out a large map that showed the existing boundary and proposed changes. The committee suggested that the advisory commission consider two separate resolutions.

The first resolution would expand the boundaries in Salem Township and Lodi Township to “square” off the greenbelt boundaries. The Salem Township boundary would be extended 1 mile to the east so the eastern greenbelt boundary would align with Superior Township to the south. The Lodi Township boundary would be extended 1 mile to the west and 1 mile to the south so the boundaries would align with the borders of Scio Township to the north and Pittsfield Township to the east.

That same resolution recommended allowing the program to acquire property that’s outside the greenbelt but adjacent to the boundary, if it is under the same ownership as an inside-the-boundary property that’s being considered for the program. This change addresses the situation of a property owner holding land on both sides of a road – one parcel within the greenbelt boundary, the other outside of it.

The formal resolution, read aloud by Catherine Riseng, states:

To recommend to City Council to expand the Greenbelt boundaries in Lodi Township and Salem Township to be consistent with the adjacent townships’ Greenbelt

boundaries. In addition, to recommend to City Council to amend the Chapter 42 Ordinance to allow properties adjacent to the Greenbelt boundary, that are under the same ownership as property located immediately adjacent within the Greenbelt boundary to be considered for acquisition.

Riseng noted that now, unlike in the past, officials in Lodi and Salem townships are supportive of the greenbelt. Salem Township has committed \$200,000 annually from the township’s landfill revenue for the next five years for land preservation. There are some wonderful properties in those townships, she noted, and the land is still reasonably close to the city.

Ezekiel described the second part of the resolution, which addresses the issue of adjacency, as “a technical patch on a problem that we found.” A situation had arisen in which a landowner wanted his entire farm protected, but two parcels were separated by a road – one side was within the greenbelt, the other wasn’t. So the city was constrained from acquiring development rights on the entire farm, even though the landowner was willing.

Peter Allen asked why there were two resolutions. Ezekiel said the resolutions were presented in a hierarchy of “no-brainerness” – the first one proposed changes that the committee felt were easier to swallow.

Carsten Hohnke said the logic behind the initial resolution was strong. While some people might say there’s still plenty of land to be preserved within the existing boundary, he could see the point about a hierarchy – the logic of this first resolution is easy to understand.

Ezekiel noted that because of boundary changes in 2007, the greenbelt was able to acquire development rights to the Nixon farm in Webster Township, which had been targeted for development as a mobile home park. It's one of the most significant acquisitions the program has made, he said. Another example is the Meyer Preserve in Superior Township, which before 2007 had fallen outside of the greenbelt boundary.

Hohnke countered that it will always be true that opportunities will exist outside the boundary, regardless of where they draw the line. That said, he acknowledged that the Nixon farm anchored one of the greenbelt's largest successes – establishing a 1,000-acre block of protected land in Webster Township.

Riseng said that Hohnke was right, but she noted that the current proposed changes are also being driven by the opportunity for additional financial support from partnering with the townships. That's in addition to the fact that there are some beautiful properties in Lodi and Salem townships that fall outside of the existing boundary, she added.

Ezekiel reported that earlier this month, several commissioners – himself, Riseng, Liz Rother and Tom Bloomer – had taken a drive with Trocchio to the bump-out in Lodi Township, and walked through some of the properties there that might be considered for the greenbelt. They were only about five miles from the Meijer store on Ann Arbor-Saline Road, he noted – it's still close to the city, even though it felt like they were far out in the country. He said his rule of thumb is that the property should be within an easy hour bike ride of the city. Voters wanted to preserve land that was relatively close to Ann Arbor, he said.

Outcome: Commissioners voted unanimously to approve the first resolution, bumping out the greenbelt boundaries in Lodi and Salem townships, and addressing the issue of adjacent properties. It will be forwarded to the city council for consideration.

Riseng then read the second resolution, noting that there would likely be some concerns about it:

To recommend to City Council to amend the Chapter 42 Ordinance to allow properties adjacent to the Greenbelt boundary to be considered for acquisition, and to recommend to City Council to amend Chapter 42 Ordinance to create a 1 mile buffer surrounding the Greenbelt boundary to allow properties that meet stricter criteria located within the buffer to be considered for acquisition.

Riseng said that there were properties within the proposed buffer that the Huron River Watershed Council had identified as high-priority bioreserves for the Huron River.

Peter Allen asked what might qualify as "stricter criteria." Riseng replied that the committee didn't believe they should be the ones to set the criteria, but that examples might include a requirement for higher financial contributions from the landowner, or a stipulation that buffer properties that have a higher value in some way, like a bioreserve.

Allen noted that on the plus side, this kind of expansion could allow the program to acquire land that was less expensive, because it was located farther from Ann Arbor. On the other hand, it could dilute attention to the core greenbelt area.

Bloomer said he didn't think the distance they were talking about would make much difference in land value. "We're still well within the development pressure area," he said. When asked by Allen if the farmland was better quality in the proposed buffer zone, Bloomer replied that he didn't know if it was better – there was just more of it.



Dan Ezekiel, chair of the greenbelt advisory commission. He is also a science teacher at Forsythe Middle School.

Trocchio said she hadn't observed a substantial price difference in the proposed buffer area. A bigger factor is whether the land is located within the Ann Arbor Public Schools district – that tends to increase value.

Hohnke said that for the changes proposed in this second resolution, he didn't think the benefits outweighed the costs. There was a lot of clarity in the first proposal, he said. There are partners in Lodi and Salem townships who are willing to participate, and it fixes the parcel-cut-in-half problem.

But this second set of changes would set up a second tier of scoring criteria, Hohnke

said, and that becomes harder to communicate. It starts diluting the program's efforts, he added, especially now that there are additional areas in Lodi and Salem that have rich opportunities. He said he was not inclined to support this resolution.

Bloomer said he agreed with Hohnke's assessment.

Allen asked whether it would be possible to return to this proposal in the future, if they didn't recommend it now. It's possible, Ezekiel said, but he wasn't sure how enthusiastic the city council would be if the commission "came back to the well" for a third time.

Riseng asked Trocchio whether there's a lot of opportunity for land preservation within the existing greenbelt boundaries. "Absolutely," Trocchio replied, especially with the inclusion of Lodi and Salem townships.

Outcome: On a 1-5 vote, the resolution – recommending a buffer zone and allowing the program to consider properties adjacent to the greenbelt for acquisition – failed, with support only from Dan Ezekiel. Mike Garfield and Laura Rubin were absent.

At the end of the meeting during his communications to commissioners, Ezekiel reported that a message had been received from Lodi Township's treasurer, indicating that the township board had talked about the boundary change at their meeting earlier this month. The consensus was that township officials are not opposed to the change, he said. The township had "jumped the gun" a bit, Ezekiel said, noting the changes still need to be approved by the city council. But he reported that he had responded to the message by saying he hoped the township

would actually support the greenbelt program, not simply “not oppose” it.

Ezekiel said he planned to contact officials in Lodi and Salem, to report on the commission’s recommendation. He hopes to secure letters of support from the townships by the time the resolution is on the council’s agenda.

Greenbelt Program Finances

A member of the city’s finance staff typically comes to the commission’s meeting once a year to give an annual financial report on the greenbelt program. On Wednesday, Kelli Martin, financial manager for the city’s community services unit, reviewed the program’s unaudited financials for FY 2011, from July 1, 2010 through June 30, 2011. The 30-year open space and parkland preservation millage, which voters approved in 2003, funds both the greenbelt program as well as land acquisition for parks. Martin’s presentation covered the overall millage-funded budget, while highlighting parts that related to the greenbelt.

Revenues from the millage were \$2.164 million in fiscal 2011, down slightly from \$2.262 million the previous year. [Two-thirds of the millage proceeds fund the greenbelt program, with the remaining third allotted to parks. The parks funding is overseen by the city’s park advisory commission.]

In addition, the greenbelt program brought in nearly \$2.8 million in federal grants during the year – the highest amount it has ever received. Those grants are from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, or FRPP. Investment income was \$233,614 for the year, down from \$492,576 in FY 2010.

In total, \$5.185 million in revenues came in for the combined greenbelt and parks acquisitions programs in FY 2011.

On the expense side, items included \$1.2 million in debt service on the \$20 million bond that the city issued in FY 2006. Those bond proceeds have now been spent, Martin noted.

The major expenses for the greenbelt program – \$8.3 million during the year – related to land preservation projects. Martin noted that over the life of the greenbelt program to date, \$24.288 million has been spent directly on land preservation projects.

In FY 2011, \$120,338 was paid to The Conservation Fund, which manages the greenbelt and park acquisition programs. Total administrative costs – including items like information technology (IT) and bond insurance – were \$161,195. Administrative expenses accounted for 1.5% of the \$10.672 million in total expenditures.

The fund balance stands at \$10.3 million, down from \$15.79 million a year ago. Of that, the greenbelt program’s share is \$6.06 million, Martin said. An endowment to fund future maintenance and enforcement of greenbelt deals stands at \$442,274.

Greenbelt Program Finances: Commissioner Comments, Questions

Peter Allen asked for more detail about the investment income. Martin reported that the lower amount in FY 2011 reflects a lower fund balance – there was less money to invest, she said. She offered to ask Matt Horning, the city’s treasurer, to attend a future meeting with more detail about the city’s investment strategy, if commissioners were interested.

Allen also asked for background on the FRPP grants. Ginny Trocchio, a Conservation Fund staff member who oversees the greenbelt program, reported that the grants helped fund the purchase of development rights for several properties. Those include the Braun, Gould, Whitney, Honke and Maulbetsch properties. It was by far the greenbelt program's busiest year, she said.



Commissioner Tom Bloomer, who also owns Bur Oaks Farm in Webster Township.

Commenting on the visual presentation, Allen suggested showing the data in chart format, so that it would be easier for people to see the trend lines. Specifically, he suggested charting the major revenue and expense trends, which he noted would show clearly how much activity is handled with relatively low administrative costs.

Carsten Hohnke, who also represents Ward 5 on city council, said one operations metric

that might be useful to the public would be to identify the cost per protected acre. That information would reflect that the greenbelt program is taking advantage of the relatively lower property values to buy development rights, he noted.

Tom Bloomer asked for an explanation of how the endowment amount is calculated for each property. Trocchio said there's a formula that's used to project future expenses that might be incurred. Those might include legal expenses and costs for monitoring compliance with the land deals.

Hohnke noted that the city hasn't had to incur any legal expenses so far, but there has been several years of monitoring. He wondered if there'd been any useful data that could be used to refine or validate the estimated monitoring costs. Trocchio indicated that the staff could revisit those calculations.

Dan Ezekiel observed that literature about land conservancies stresses the importance of setting aside funds for monitoring compliance and protecting conservation easements. Setting up an endowment for that purpose is one of the most important things a land preservation program can do, he said, and it's a point of pride that Ann Arbor's greenbelt program has done that since its inception.

Greenbelt Annual Report

Ginny Trocchio presented an activity report for fiscal year 2011, which ended June 30.

The greenbelt program completed 12 transactions during the year, protecting 1,472 acres of farmland, Trocchio reported. Deals included nearly 680 acres of farmland along Whitmore Lake Road, which serves as a gateway into Ann Arbor.

Examples of FY 2011 greenbelt deals include:

- \$1 million for the 146-acre Whitney farm in Webster Township, plus a \$23,867 endowment.
- \$2.5 million for the 286-acre Braun farm in Ann Arbor Township, plus a \$25,000 endowment.
- \$438,936 for the 51-acre Gould property, also in Ann Arbor Township, plus a \$24,000 endowment.
- \$683,459 for the 96-acre Honke property in Northfield Township, plus a \$23,867 endowment.
- \$734,067 for the 128-acre Maulbetsch property in Northfield Township, plus a \$23,867 endowment.

Since the greenbelt program began, 3,214 acres have been preserved, Trocchio said.

Trocchio also reviewed the program's goals for the past year, noting that most were exceeded:

- Goal: Apply for grant funds on two properties. Result: One grant was applied for, but a second application was withdrawn by the property owner.
- Goal: Close on four properties. Result: The city closed on 12 properties.
- Goal: Complete a 1,000-acre block of preserved land in Webster Township. Result: 1,200 acres are now protected there by the greenbelt program.
- Goal: Complete the first greenbelt bus tour. Result: A bus tour was held in July 2010. Additional tours will be organized for the current fiscal year.
- Goal: Obtain at least 20% matching funds on all transactions. Result: This was achieved. The overall

average was 52% matching funds for completed transactions.

- Three goals are identified for the current fiscal year: (1) Apply for grant funds on two properties; (2) close on three properties; and (3) obtain at least 20% matching funds on all transactions.

In noting the lower goal of closing on three properties, Trocchio said she didn't think they could keep up with the pace of this year's acquisitions.

Greenbelt Annual Report: Commissioner Discussion

Carsten Hohnke asked Trocchio to review the program's communications strategy. He said he didn't see any goals about this for the current year, and wondered what the staff planned to do, other than the bus tour and general media coverage.



Commissioner Catherine Riseng, an aquatic ecologist and researcher at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment.

Trocchio said she could certainly add communications goals to the list. She noted that she and Dan Ezekiel, the commission's

chair, had an information booth in the Homegrown Festival earlier this month. She also had a display about Ann Arbor's greenbelt program at a conference hosted by the Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy earlier this year. More of that kind of outreach is planned, she said.

In reviewing the year's overall activities, Ezekiel said it was a banner year for the program, and the excellence of the staff has really shined through. Ann Arbor taxpayers have protected 3,200 acres, he noted. To put it in perspective, he said, it's the equivalent of 80 parks the size of Veterans Memorial Park in Ann Arbor, or about 5 square miles. "And we're nowhere near finished," he said.

It's a credit to Ann Arbor voters and taxpayers that they're willing to tax themselves in order to preserve land near the periphery of the city, he said. No one anticipated the crash in land values and the lull in development because of the economy, and the program has been able to take advantage of that.

Ezekiel observed that the greenbelt program is under the radar – if the program does its job, nothing changes, because the land is preserved as it is. The program's charge is to protect some of the best land in the area forever. If and when development pressure returns, that's when people will notice what's been done, he said. Many years from now, he added, people will be happy with what the city has been able to do during this time.

Peter Allen observed that they haven't created a greenbelt as much as they've protected the foodshed. He wondered how many farms were represented in the 3,200 protected acres. Ezekiel said that of the 27 total properties, 24 of them are farms and three are open space. Allen then queried

Tom Bloomer – who also owns Bur Oaks Farm in Webster Township, which is part of the greenbelt program – to comment on the economic value of goods produced on these farms.

Bloomer was hesitant to speculate, saying the answer would be complicated. He did venture that in general, the economic value of farming is consistently underestimated.

Outcome: The commission voted unanimously to accept the activity report for fiscal 2011.

Greenbelt Acquisitions

At the end of their meeting, commissioners entered into a closed session to discuss potential land acquisitions.

Land acquisition is one of the few exceptions under the Open Meetings Act that allow for discussion out of public view. When they emerged after about 40 minutes in closed session, commissioners voted on three resolutions.

Properties are identified only by application number at this stage. The location of the properties and their owners aren't revealed until the resolutions are voted on by the city council.

- Recommending approval of the purchase of development rights for the parcel in application 2011-04, if at least 20% matching funds are received.
- Recommending approval of the purchase of development rights for the parcel in application 2011-01, if at least 20% matching funds are received.
- Recommending that the city partner with the nonprofit Legacy Land Conservancy on the purchase of development rights for the parcel in application 2005-24, and contribute

up to \$15,000 dollars toward that purchase.

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Outcome: In separate votes, commissioners unanimously approved resolutions for all three greenbelt acquisitions. The recommendations will be considered by the city council for approval.

Misc. Communications

There were several opportunities for updates from commissioners and staff.

Misc. Communications: New Meeting Time?

Dan Ezekiel told commissioners that he hoped they could alter their meeting time in order to accommodate a potential new commissioner. [Shannon Brines, who attended last month's greenbelt advisory commission, is expected to be nominated for the position vacated this summer by Gil Omenn, who was term limited. 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.]

Commissioners will complete a survey about possible meeting times. Any changes wouldn't take effect until 2012. Currently, the commission meets on the second Wednesday of each month at 4:30 p.m. Other commissioners indicated that the current meeting time is difficult for them, too.

Misc. Communications: Executive Committee

Ezekiel expressed interest in expanding the commission's executive committee. Now, it consists of the chair (Ezekiel), vice chair (Catherine Riseng), city council representative (Carsten Hohnke) and staff

(Ginny Trocchio). Ezekiel noted that in the coming years there will be considerable turnover on the commission, as members are term limited.

Bringing another member into the executive committee would help future leadership get up to speed, Ezekiel said, and help keep the group's institutional memory strong. He said it was an open invitation to commissioners, and that they should contact Trocchio if they're interested.

Misc. Communications: Bus Tour

Trocchio reported that she'd like to schedule another greenbelt bus tour sometime this fall. She's looking at Saturdays when there's not a University of Michigan home football game: Oct. 8, 15 or Nov. 5. The tour would last about two hours and include stops to see land that's been protected by the greenbelt program.

Present: Peter Allen, Tom Bloomer, Dan Ezekiel, Carsten Hohnke, Catherine Riseng, Liz Rother. Also: Ginny Trocchio.

Absent: Mike Garfield, Laura Rubin.

Next regular meeting: Wednesday, Oct. 12 at 4:30 p.m. in the second-floor council chambers at city hall, 301 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor.