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Greenbelt Group Briefed on Pittsfield Plan

Also: Salem Twp. board allocates funds for land preservation

By MARY MORGAN

Ann Arbor greenbelt advisory commission meeting (Aug. 10, 2011): Possible partnerships with other local communities – including Pittsfield and Salem townships – were the focus of this month's greenbelt advisory commission (GAC) meeting.



Pittsfield Township planner Paul Montagno helps Anissa Bowden of the Ann Arbor city clerk's staff set up his presentation for the greenbelt advisory commission at its Aug. 10, 2011 meeting. (Photos by the writer.)

Township planner Paul Montagno briefed commissioners on Pittsfield Township's updated master plan, which the township board approved late last month. Specifically, he focused on the section concerning open space, natural features and agricultural land use. He described efforts to balance denser development along corridors like State Road and Michigan Avenue while protecting more

rural land, especially in the central and southern parts of the township.

Pittsfield Township has partnered with Ann Arbor's greenbelt program on just one property – the Hilton farm, near the township's large Pittsfield Preserve nature area. However, Montagno indicated that township officials are open to future land preservation deals with the greenbelt.

Also during the Aug. 10 meeting, Ginny Trocchio of The Conservation Fund, which manages Ann Arbor's greenbelt program, reported that the previous day, the Salem Township board had approved an ordinance that created a purchase of development rights (PDR) program, and allocated \$200,000 annually for land preservation. GAC is considering possible expansion of the greenbelt boundaries, including an expansion in Salem Township. The boundary proposal was discussed at the commission's July meeting, and will be on the agenda again in September.

The commission took one formal vote on Wednesday, after emerging from a closed session to discuss land acquisition. Commissioners unanimously approved a resolution recommending that city council move forward with application 2010-09 if at least 50% matching funds are secured. Properties are identified only by application

number at this stage, and the resolution did not indicate what type of land acquisition this would entail. Typically, greenbelt monies are spent on the purchase of development rights (PDR).

There is currently one vacancy on GAC. Shannon Brines, owner of Brines Farm and a member of the city's public market advisory commission, attended Wednesday's meeting and expressed interest in applying for the seat. Nominations to GAC are made and approved by the city council.

Pittsfield Township Land Preservation

Paul Montagno, a planner for Pittsfield Township, gave a brief presentation about land preservation efforts in the township, primarily as reflected in its recently updated 2010 master plan. Township supervisor Mandy Grewal had been scheduled to attend, but could not because of an unexpected conflict, he said.

The township's final plan was adopted by the township board at its July 27, 2011 meeting. Among several components is a category for open space, natural features and agriculture. [.pdf of master plan section on open space, natural features and agriculture]

The township has its feet in many worlds, Montagno said. It's near urban areas like Ann Arbor to the north, Saline to the southwest, and Ypsilanti to the east. But in many areas, Pittsfield Township is a rural community, and shares borders with other rural townships. There are a variety of land uses in the township – areas of density along corridors like State Road, Carpenter Road and Michigan Avenue, as well as rural areas that should be preserved. "Ultimately, what we're looking at is a balance," he said.

DEVELOPMENT INTENSITY MAP



A "heat map" of development in Pittsfield Township – red and orange areas indicate denser commercial and residential development. Areas in the center and southern parts of the township include more open space, natural features and agricultural land. (Links to larger image)

The goal is to alleviate pressure on rural areas by focusing development along existing commercial and residential corridors – areas that already have water/sewer access and transportation, or that would be logical extensions of those existing corridors. The inverse of that is to look at agricultural and natural areas – primarily in the center and southern parts of the township – and find ways to preserve that land.

For each of the master plan's key concepts, the plan identifies specific goals and then more detailed objectives to achieve those goals, Montagna said. Now that the plan has been officially adopted, he added, "the real work begins."

Montagna reviewed the goals for the key concept of open space, natural features and agriculture:

- Encourage the protection of agricultural lands that are most productive and suited to agricultural

operations, and implement policies that provide additional protection.

- Create connections between natural areas and protect significant viewsheds.
- Promote natural resources protection on a local and regional level in a planned and strategic manner.
- Ensure that development decisions support, protect and enhance the natural environments and ecosystems in the township.

As part of the plan's implementation, updating the township's zoning ordinances is a major project. The township will be looking for ways to support and promote agriculture, Montagno said. That might include things like allowing for a greater number of farm stands or activities like corn mazes. While not directly agricultural land use, he said, these uses would help make farming more economically viable.

Montagno concluded his presentation by noting that the final version of the masterplan would be posted on the township's website later in the week.

Pittsfield Township: Commissioner Discussion

Peter Allen asked if the Ann Arbor greenbelt program had partnered with Pittsfield on any land preservation efforts. Just one, Montagno said – the Hilton farm, about 90 acres at the corner of Morgan and Platt roads, near the township's large Pittsfield Preserve. Ginny Trocchio of The Conservation Fund, which manages the greenbelt program, confirmed that there are no other potential deals in the pipeline.

Mike Garfield asked whether the township envisioned having funds for a purchase of development rights (PDR) program in the future. Montagno said the township would

look at possible tools, like the PDR, to pursue land preservation. They had no specific plans now, he said, but those are among the implementation goals of the township's master plan.

Garfield followed up by asking whether the township would consider making a financial contribution to a deal, if a project were presented. Montagno indicated that budgets are tight, but said he didn't want to say no. As a policy, the township would work with programs like the greenbelt or Legacy Land Conservancy on land preservation projects, he said.

Saying he'd heard rumors that some people in the township want to see currently protected property open for development, Garfield also wanted to know if there was any truth to that. Montagno said he wasn't aware of that, although during the process of updating the master plan, he said township officials felt pressure to change some areas that were zoned for lower density uses – some people wanted areas rezoned for more commercial uses.

Garfield praised the township for its land preservation work over the last 10-20 years, especially in the center of the township. The township has created a remarkable buffer between the rural areas and the cities of Ann Arbor, Saline and Ypsilanti, he said. The greenbelt commissioners had been happy to partner on the Hilton property, Garfield said, and if there are other opportunities, GAC would like to participate.

Montagno responded by saying that a major part of the master plan had been an emphasis on connectivity. While Garfield had characterized it as a buffer, the township doesn't want to create barriers, Montagno said. So township officials are also looking for ways to connect residents to the

preserved land – things like low-intensity roads through some of the preserves and gravel parking lots with bioswales for stormwater management. Providing a certain amount of access will enhance the popularity of land preservation, he said.

Tom Bloomer, a GAC member and Webster Township farmer, noted that one of the objectives listed under the goal of protecting agricultural lands is to balance the rights of farmers and adjacent residential property owners. What did that mean? Bloomer asked.

Montagno said the township wants to make sure that property uses next to agricultural lands are appropriate. There can be tensions between residential developments and farms, he said. A farm's dust, odors and hours of operation might conflict with residents of a housing development, for example, and whenever possible there should be a natural buffer between the two types of land uses.

With no further questions from commissioners, Montagno wrapped up by saying the township definitely wanted to partner with Ann Arbor's greenbelt program in the future.

Misc. Communications

Ginny Trocchio told commissioners that Shannon Brines, an Ann Arbor resident and owner of Brines Farm in Dexter, had come to the meeting after expressing interest in a vacancy that's available on the commission. Brines came to the podium and spoke briefly, telling commissioners that he kept up with their work by reading minutes as well as Ann Arbor Chronicle meeting reports. The commission's work is important, he said: "You have followers."



Shannon Brines, owner of Brines Farm, is interested in the vacancy on the greenbelt advisory commission, and attended its Aug. 10 meeting.

Brines said he started working at the University of Michigan in 1998 – he is manager of the environmental spatial analysis (ESA) lab at the School of Natural Resources and Environment. He does a lot of work with GIS mapping, helping researchers and students on land use and other issues. Brines also is a lecturer at UM, and said there might be some occasions when his courses conflicted with GAC meetings.

Brines started his farm in 2004. It's located outside the greenbelt boundary, he noted, and also would fall outside of the proposed expansion of its boundaries. Though he sells produce year-round at the Ann Arbor Farmers Market, Brines said he's best known for his hoop house produce, selling greens from November through May.

This was not mentioned at the meeting, but since 2007 Brines also 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.

Peter Allen encouraged Brines to apply for a position on GAC, saying his point of view and background would be a valuable addition.

Two vacancies opened on GAC earlier this year. Liz Rother was appointed by the city council in June to replace term-limited Jennifer Santi Hall. The remaining vacancy is an at-large slot, held by former GAC member Gil Omenn. 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.

Misc. Communications: Salem Township

Trocchio reported that on Tuesday, the Salem Township board had approved an ordinance that created a purchase of development rights (PDR) program, and allocated \$200,000 annually for land preservation. She said she looked forward to partnering with the township in the future.

GAC is considering possible expansion of the greenbelt boundaries, including an expansion in Salem Township. The proposal was discussed at the commission's July meeting, and will be on the agenda again in September. Any changes recommended by GAC would need approval by the Ann Arbor city council before taking effect. Since the Open Space and Parkland Preservation millage was approved by voters in 2003, the council has expanded the boundaries once, in August 2007, by bumping out the boundary by a mile.

Closed Session: Land Acquisition

Commissioners voted to enter into closed session to discuss land acquisitions, and

emerged after about 40 minutes. Land acquisition is one of the few exceptions under the Open Meetings Act that allow for discussion out of public view. Commissioners then voted on a resolution to recommend that the city council move forward with application 2010-09 if at least 50% matching funds are secured. The resolution did not indicate what type of land acquisition this would entail. Typically, greenbelt monies are spent on the purchase of development rights (PDR).

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.

Outcome: Commissioners unanimously approved the land acquisition recommendation.

Present: Peter Allen, Tom Bloomer, Mike Garfield, Catherine Riseng, Liz Rother, Laura Rubin. Also: Ginny Trocchio.

Absent: Dan Ezekiel, Carsten Hohnke.

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