

Washtenaw County is leading the way in land preservation

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The purchase of a conservation easement on the property owned by Tom and Rosanne Bloomer of Webster Township on Nov. 4 is truly a momentous occasion for land preservation in Washtenaw County and indeed the State of Michigan.

That evening on the way to celebrate the closing it struck me that it's taken 10 years of work to get here.

It was July 1995 when a group of citizens began meeting and developing the rationale to approach the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners with a proposal for public funding of farmland preservation with a dedicated millage.

That work culminated in the bitter and divisive campaign of 1998, when opposition interests ran an effective "greenscam" campaign and defeated Proposal 1 58-42 percent. It was the first time a countywide farmland preservation program had been proposed in Michigan, and its sound defeat has kept the issue off county ballots since.

While devastated by the loss, activists were nevertheless undeterred in bringing land preservation programs to Washtenaw County. Just two years after the 1998 loss, the Natural Area Preservation Program was placed on the ballot and won with 64 percent of the vote countywide.

That program - run by the county Parks and Recreation Commission - is an unprecedented model for the protection of ecologically significant land, made accessible to the public for quiet recreational use.

NAPP has protected significant lands across the county including river frontage, woodlands and wetlands, with more being added regularly.

That victory was followed by the 2003 campaigns in the City of Ann Arbor and Ann Arbor Township to fund land preservation, and then Scio Township in 2004 and Webster Township in 2005. All were passed with 67 percent support or more for the protection of farmland and open space. There are 10 programs in Michigan that fund nontraditional land preservation and half of them are in Washtenaw County.

The commitment by voters to see their productive, beautiful and threatened landscapes protected for future generations now totals over \$100 million. That is an extraordinary figure and one that is the envy of all those who are confronting uncoordinated development.

As has been said and proven for years, success breeds success. The matching fund dollars needed to realize goals for protecting land are in short supply and great demand. Having dedicated revenue together with high quality natural and agricultural lands attracts those dollars here, as evidenced by Washtenaw County receiving nearly 90 percent of the available federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program funds earlier this year.

Many people have contributed to this success as volunteers, campaign contributors and leaders. In particular Mayor John Hieftje in Ann Arbor, John Allison in Ann Arbor Township, Chuck Ream in Scio Township, Mike Garfield of the Ecology Center and Doug Cowherd of the Sierra Club Huron Valley Group deserve special recognition.

The tide is shifting. Soon farmland owners will realize that there really is a future in agriculture in Washtenaw County and will be more willing to invest in farming and less likely to sell for development. All it takes is a sufficient land base, and we are well on our way to providing that.

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