

## Saving Land in the Real World

Our land is being "developed." Appraisers term it "improved," but I doubt this is the case. It is critically important that a countervailing force against this development and in favor of permanent land preservation be institutionalized to improve the diversity, balance, and durability of our future ecosystems. We will ultimately prosper or perish in connection with the condition of our land and our water. You can help by taking action to preserve land and weave the web of life. You can dig into your community for the long term (locally and globally) and help shape it! There is a place and a way for everybody to act. Apply your talents where they will be most valuable. Below are some suggestions for very concrete ways in which you can help save land.

1. Buy land yourself or with others. Either way, deed restrict all or part of it for conservation uses. This restricts the use of the property. It is legally binding and may become a permanent part of the deed to the property (after being legally "recorded" at the local Register of Deeds office). For example, you might stipulate the maximum number of dwelling units or structures that can be built on the land, or preserve the area within a particular "legal description" for perpetuity.

2. Get involved with a local land or water issue. Be the one to take minutes, make phone calls, or speak to the local boards. Talk about open space, quality of life, managed growth, and clean air and water. It often touches a chord with the local populace and newspaper.

★ 3. Run for local office! You can do it! As you drive by a site where giant bulldozers are stripping and leveling our holy Mother Earth you might regret that you and your allies are not the people who have the vote when these projects come to the table. If you won't run yourself, then find somebody who will and help them win. You would be amazed at the power of land preservation issues to defeat entrenched local power structures at the polls. Try running a slate which will comprise a majority of the board, particularly if you are not ready yet to be Mayor, Supervisor, Treasurer, or Clerk. Don't be shy. (Often these local boards are controlled by realtors. We must see that our "interests" are represented as strongly as theirs).

4. Start a local citizens group and/or operate as a knowledgeable concerned citizen. If you can't yet run for office, the influence you can have on local land use is still amazing. If you are persistent, you can define the issues in the local debate.

5. Volunteer to serve on the local Planning Commission. This is where the nitty gritty analysis of developer's plans is done. Planning Commissions have a lot of power to shape a plan, especially when rezoning is needed by the applicant. After you speak to the board a few times (persistently, but courteously with the facts), they may put you on the Planning Commission to "get you out of their hair," or to keep you from running for their seat. Run anyway, if you need to.

6. Analyze Local Land Use Guidelines and catalyze a

review and re-do. So you're not on the Planning Commission yet? There is still critical work to do. Get copies of two documents, the local Zoning Code and the local Master Plan. You may need to be persistent.

Your local Zoning Code may be a thick document. If you read and make notes on the whole thing you may immediately be recognized as "a player." Many Board members have never read the whole thing. Discuss the consequences of full implementation of current zoning (maybe do a "buildout analysis"). Is that really what the community wants for its future? How long has it been since a complete review and revision of the zoning code has occurred? Often you can get that process started, and then influence it to have much stronger landscaping requirements, open space zoning, a wetlands ordinance, or "clustering" in new developments.

Your Local Master Plan, sometimes called the Land Use Plan, is a document that tells you what the community has decided its land uses will be in the near term. It represents their land use goals. Look over the Zoning and Master Plan maps very carefully. Does it look to you like it shows what the local citizens want to happen? Also, does the board stick with its Master Plan when challenged, or does it "bend in the wind" for nearly every developer? You can catalyze the same review and revision process with the Master Plan, getting it changed and improved, and then, when some abomination of a shopping mall wants to go in down the street, you can easily mobilize the community with the cry of "let's defend the Master Plan." Make sure it is something you want to protect (or is as good as you can get).

7. Join your local Land Conservancy. If you actually would rather die than sit through all those government meetings, you can join your local Land Conservancy to "get your feet wet." There are now more than 1200 of them in the United States, so there is one near you. These groups try to get money from private or governmental sources to either buy land outright or to purchase Conservation Easements. Conservancies are very often looking for workers to haul trash, remove invasive species, make a trail, or do other work on land they have bought. When they buy a Conservation Easement it places a Deed Restriction against further development of the property, but the conservancy does not acquire ownership of the property. The speculative value of the property that is lost can become a tax deduction for the owner. Find the Land conservancy near you by contacting the Land Trust Alliance, 1331 H St., NW Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005-4730; fax: (202) 638-4730. Or, you could get their book *Starting a Land Trust*.

8. Join the international Nature Conservancy. This quite amazing, scientifically based, world wide conservation organization has preserved ecologically valuable pieces of land all over the world for more than 50 years. They are actively gaining in money and clout. They are capable of negotiating agreements with foreign governments, and are able to get contributions from large corporations. They know that the key tasks of the future will be protecting the land that

ready been legally preserved and finding alternative sources of economic viability within preserved areas. The Nature Conservancy has state chapters in which you can get involved. This is an effective, exciting, and still "mainstream" group. Contact them at: The Nature Conservancy, 4245 North Fairfax Dr., Suite 100, Arlington, VA 22203-1606; (703) 841-5300; www.nature.org.

9. Join your local "watershed" organization or get a group motivated to start one. The complete "watershed" (drainage area) of a major river is a naturally occurring "region" that can bring people from many communities together to work for a clean river and all the benefits it brings, such as groundwater quality protection, wildlife and plant habitat, aquatic habitat, flood and stormwater control, protection from erosion, and beauty and recreation. Wetlands adjacent to rivers must be protected. A model Wetlands Ordinance should be secured, and then passed by all the communities in the "watershed." For more information, contact Huron River Watershed Council, 1100 N. Main St., Suite 210, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48104; (734) 769-5123; www.hrwc.org.

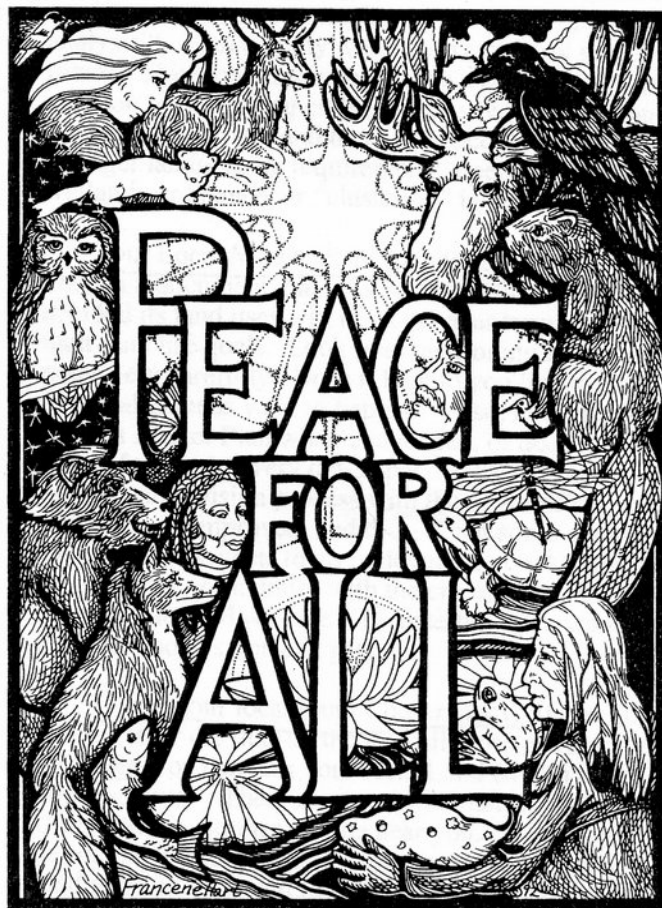
10. Create a local (or statewide) ballot initiative to create a fund from tax dollars for preserving land! This could be the most important of all the actions you can take. The initiative could levy a millage and collect and spend the money over a ten or fifteen year period, or float a bond for a lump sum right now, to be paid off by subsequent taxation. These initiatives usually pass in as many as 75% of cases. You must have an active local group and you must make strong and successful efforts to get your local County Commission to see that citizens want land preservation badly enough to pay for it. Get a well researched proposal together and get the Board to put it on the ballot. You may not be successful on the first try. It is, after all, a new tax. Never give up! Make it clear that you have people who will be running for the County Commissioners' seats if they refuse to put Land Preservation on the ballot. Try not to "war" with the builders/developers/realtors, though. They have more money than you do and can beat you if they feel like totally committing themselves. Such an alliance (hugely funded) defeated our 1998 effort in Washtenaw County, Michigan. Our initiative included preservation of farmland. Builders love to build on farmland, so they would not support it. After talking with them for a year, and showing them that property values are higher and stay higher near permanently preserved land, they grudgingly supported a "Natural Areas" millage which did not include

farmland. It then passed easily. In Washtenaw County, Michigan, our tiny 1/4 mill levy (which would be \$18.75 annually on a \$150,000 home) will generate 25 or 30 million over 10 years to buy land. You can make these things happen! In what other way are you going to come up with 30 million dollars to protect land, water, habitat, animals, and plants?

### Conclusion

You can worship mother Gaia by preserving part of the wild. A small group of dedicated people can change public policy when their work evinces quality and their timing is right. Dare to struggle. Dare to win! Cast a spell of love, skill, and power to protect the body of our holy Mother Earth!

Seed — me — Charles Ream (10/18)  
Ann Arbor, Michigan



Art by Francene Hart

## Documents RE: Washtenaw County (Mich.) "Natural Areas Preservation Program"

- 1) Go to [www.ewashtenaw.org](http://www.ewashtenaw.org)
- 2) " " Gout
- 3) " " more departments
- 4) " " Parks and Recreation
- 5) " " Activities Index
- 6) " " MISC.
- 7) " " NATAC program

Ordinance 125

Still Need Ballot Language.

You can do it!  
with a little help from  
your friends — get the  
county planners behind  
it. If they hesitate  
just keep going