
A Little 40 Is Big Gift to Family and Future

By Keith Schneider of the Michigan Land Use Institute for the Lake Huron Alliance

CHESANING — Forty acres of fallow ground, especially in Saginaw County, which has 325,000 acres under cultivation and a \$91 million a year agricultural economy, is easy to ignore. That is until it ceases to be a field and, accompanied by a competing chorus of praise for new business activity or concern about haphazard growth, becomes a subdivision or a parking lot.

Jerry Humpula, who's farmed, owns an agricultural drainage company, and lived all of his 66 years where Chesaning Road and Bishop Road meet south of Saginaw, understands why open land is treated as a commodity to buy, sell, and develop. But at this point in his life, he's more sympathetic to the view that once it's gone, it's gone forever.

Four years ago, Mr. Humpula decided to be one of the first farmers in Maple Grove Township to take advantage of federal land conservation and tax benefit programs and permanently safeguard 22 of his 40 acres. The other 18 acres, he says, are also likely to be protected for wildlife and as a place for his heirs to wander. The Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy is coordinating the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program – a state and federal partnership designed to encourage permanent conservation of farmland.

It's that last piece that has proven to be especially attractive. Protecting land prompted Mr. Humpula to consider how values of family, farming, and his own legacy converge around what he calls "a little 40" that Humpulas have worked along Chesaning Road since the first decade of the 20th century.

"Humpula's have been on this road a long time," he said, "ever since my granddad came from the old country. We're trying to carry on. I tell you it makes me feel really good to have done this."

The same can be said of hundreds of other landowners in the 22-county Saginaw Bay watershed, and thousands more in northeast Michigan and statewide. In an era characterized by intense discord about almost everything, one of the very few ideas that invites rare agreement is the need to conserve farmland and natural habitat.

The six non-profit land conservancies in northeast Michigan, all members of the Lake Huron Alliance, have helped private landowners voluntarily and permanently protect 11,577 acres of farm and wild lands, most of it in the last five years.

In early September, Ducks Unlimited and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources added 342 acres of restored wetlands to the Shiawassee River State Game Area.

This and other examples of voluntary protection are part of a state and national land conservation trend that is gaining momentum. At the local level in Michigan, for instance, 23 townships in 14 counties, according to the state Department of Agriculture, have established the legal authority to protect agricultural land by buying development rights from farmers.

And although Lapeer County voters last summer defeated a proposal to raise property taxes to pay for farmland conservation, residents in six Michigan townships in Grand Traverse, Kent, and Washtenaw counties have done the opposite: Approving property tax increases to buy land development rights from willing sellers.

The Trust for Public Land, a national land conservancy, found that since 1994, 384 local and state ballot measures to protect farmland, open space, and natural habitat have been put before voters; 312, or 81 percent, were approved.

There are good reasons for such interest. Population growth and new development — including second home construction in places like Roscommon, Crawford, and Otsego counties — has intruded on the natural character and quality of life prized by rural residents. Erosion and sedimentation produced by new development harms fisheries in Saginaw Bay and elsewhere that support northeast Michigan's recreational economy.

Federal land conservation programs — the Agriculture Department's Conservation Reserve Program is particularly useful — and federal tax incentives have made it economically attractive for landowners to preserve their ground. Federal tax incentives make it possible for landowners to voluntarily preserve land with conservation easements and receive reductions on their tax bills worth thousands of dollars annually.

But just as important as these incentives is the personal satisfaction that comes with protecting their ground. It's an emotion that lies very deep and can't be quantified in dollars. "My granddad was a farmer who came here from Czechoslovakia around 1910," says Mr. Humpula.

"My dad didn't farm. He started a drainage business. But when my Dad lived on his father's farm he milked and hauled sugar beets."

"Now my grandkids come up," Mr. Humpula finished. "They like to hunt and fish and watch the animals and critters and bugs. That is something the family enjoys. If you look at things in the long run, that's something they'll always be able to do here."

If you're interested in donating a conservation easement or would like to learn more about land conservation in the Lake Huron basin, please visit www.lakehuronalliance.org or contact The Conservation Fund, 989-892-9171.

Land Conservation: New Tool for Prosperity

By Keith Schneider of the Michigan Land Use Institute for the Lake Huron Alliance

It isn't hard to grasp the readily apparent environmental reasons for permanently conserving beautiful wild lands. Though Michigan is among the nation's slowest growing states in population, it also is among the leaders in spreading people out, consuming 60,000 acres a year for new homes, businesses, malls, roads, and the like. Evidence of the state's great migration outward – the new forest cuts, drained and filled wetlands, home sites along rivers and lakes —is visible across all the counties closest to Lake Huron, even in the seven that the U.S. Census says are actually losing people.

Not so readily understood, perhaps, is how conserving land benefits the region's economic competitiveness. It turns out, though, that protecting land, particularly ecologically significant wild lands, sensitive coastal lands, and high value farmland and open space, is a central factor in the new calculation about what it takes to build prosperity in the 21st century. Why? Because people really like living and working in places that have easy access to natural resources, that look beautiful and feel clean and green. This is especially true of the talented, innovative, entrepreneurial young people that Michigan needs to attract and retain to lead our knowledge-based economy.

At the moment, neither Michigan nor its metropolitan regions are competing as well as Minneapolis, Chicago, Pittsburgh, or even Milwaukee in coaxing highly educated people to stay and build the high-value business sectors of the 21st century like banking, digital communications, engineering, and design. Michigan's job and income growth, as well as the percentage of people who earned college and advanced degrees, lags behind Illinois and Minnesota in the Great Lakes region.

But Michigan is ahead of almost any state in the quality and quantity of its natural resources. It has more land protected in public forests, parks, and by voluntary farmland and open space conservation agreements – some 9.3 million acres — than any state east of the Mississippi River. And it has more clean fresh water than any place on earth. It has over 3,000 miles of Great Lakes coastline.

This natural bounty, once viewed in Michigan as something to exploit, has emerged instead as a treasure to be thoughtfully utilized to build durable prosperity. The Northeast Michigan Council of Governments, for example, cites conserving the region's forests and high quality waters as top priorities in its strategic plan to help local governments build their economies. In 2003, the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council, a 26-member commission appointed by Governor Jennifer M. Granholm and Republican legislative leaders, issued a report that essentially made the same case for the state.

What's intriguing in the 21st century is how prominent civic institutions in Michigan are addressing the links between prosperity and land conservation. One of the hottest sectors is philanthropy. The Flint-based Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, for instance, is making grants to improve the competitiveness of urban businesses and residents –

thereby improving the quality of city life. Other grant-making promotes natural resource conservation, including protecting wild lands and habitat. In both of these grant-making sectors, the foundation is responding to Michigan's powerful economic transition that is reshaping big cities and small communities.

Five years ago, the Mott Foundation pledged \$7.5 million to The Conservation Fund, a national organization with an office in Bay City, to establish the Great Lakes Revolving Loan Fund to protect coastal and other freshwater sites that are ecologically significant. More recently, the Mott Foundation pledged \$10 million, along with millions more from other Michigan foundations, to help the Nature Conservancy protect 270,000 acres of forest in the Upper Peninsula.

“Of all the big projects we've done, the one where economic development aspects were explicitly part of the reasoning and most persuasive, is the project in the Upper Peninsula,” said Sam Passmore, a program officer in the Mott Foundation's environment program. “The land ownership patterns there were similar to those in northeast Michigan. There were very large parcels owned by industrial companies or hunt clubs. We felt the project would stabilize the landscape and protect the traditional economic activities of the region — forestry, snowmobiling, and other recreational uses — and emerging sectors like ecotourism. I'm not sure we would have made that commitment if there weren't this complex set of motivators.”

Other prominent Michigan foundations provide their own land protection grants. In 2004, the Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation awarded \$1.5 million to the Midland-based Little Forks Conservancy, a non-profit land conservation organization, to support an endowment.

Local master plans across northeast Michigan routinely cite the need to protect land and water as essential to a community's future well-being. And six land conservancies along Lake Huron have helped private landowners voluntarily protect over 11,500 acres, most of it in the last five years.

If you're interested in donating a conservation easement or would like to learn more about land conservation in the Lake Huron basin, please visit www.lakehuronalliance.org or contact The Conservation Fund, 989-892-9171.

Protective Belt Wrapped Around Pigeon River Country

By Keith Schneider of the Michigan Land Use Institute for the Lake Huron Alliance

VANDERBILT — Ever since it was established in the early 1970s, the 105,000-acre Pigeon River Country State Forest has served as a center of innovation for joining land conservation, habitat, and economic goals. In 1980, 12 years after energy companies discovered a vast reservoir of oil and gas beneath the forest, three energy companies reached agreement with the state to strictly limit the number of drilling platforms. Just 22 production sites were allowed in the southern third of the forest in order to safeguard the elk herd and 70,000 acres of wild lands in the north.

Now a new land conservation project, designed to protect the wild lands in four counties that border the state forest's boundaries, is gaining momentum. The idea is to improve land stewardship practices along the edge to ensure the entire forest stays healthy. Landowners are learning about new ways to improve wildlife habitat, how to reduce erosion, and techniques for managing their land as a wild domain. Some have embraced voluntarily establishing conservation easements, which permanently protect their land from development.

The conservation project is the product of a novel partnership that includes the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and seven conservation organizations. "There are more than 600 private landowners with more than 40 acres along the boundary of the state forest," said Brad Jensen, executive director of the Huron Pines RC&D, the Grayling-based conservation group that is coordinating the work. "Those are the people to reach with our message of better conservation practices for the forest, for wildlife, and for water quality."

Though northeast Michigan has been challenged by the state's lingering economic weakness, one of the unnoticed bright spots is how devoted government agencies and private land conservancies are to securing the region's wild lands and farmland. The economy, culture, and lifestyle in most of the counties closest to Lake Huron are more closely tied to the quality of the land than almost anywhere else in Michigan. Land conservation is not only an ethic in the Lake Huron watershed, it's an economic and ecological necessity.

Take the walleye fishery in the Saginaw Bay. It's recovering, says the Department of Natural Resources, partly as a result of precipitous declines in the number of alewives, which feed on walleye young, and also because water quality is improving. And that's due, in part, to better stewardship, land conservation, and less erosion on the 8,709 square miles of land upstream from the bay. Walleye are re-establishing spawning grounds once buried in sediments or polluted by nutrients and chemicals.

Twenty years ago, according to the DNR, the walleye sport fishery in Saginaw Bay was worth \$28 million annually in 1986 dollars. The fishery's continued recovery could eventually generate much more than that. The connection between land

conservation, habitat protection, ecological vigor all make much more sense when there's that kind of money at stake.

Michigan has long been more comfortable than most states with such logic. In the 1970s, Michigan established what is still the nation's most comprehensive state program of land conservation by enacting laws to protect wetlands, sand dunes, natural rivers, inland lakes and streams, prevent erosion, steward farmland, add to the state park system, and enlarge the state forest system. According to the DNR, state public lands support 400,000 jobs and contribute over \$13 billion to Michigan's economy each year. State parks attract more than 25 million visitors annually.

The idea of fostering superior land stewardship also generated substantial public interest in permanently protecting Michigan's landscape through voluntary purchases and conservation easements on private land. The state has 47 non-profit land conservancies that have protected nearly 94,000 acres statewide, more than any state in the Midwest, according to a national census in 2003.

Six of those conservancies are in the counties that make up the Lake Huron watershed, including the Headwaters Land Conservancy, one of the partners in the work to protect the boundaries of the Pigeon River Country State Forest. The conservancy has worked with landowners, who voluntarily have protected more than 5,000 acres of forest. Almost no one doubts the value of that in Otsego County, where the state forest is a mainstay in a \$100 million-a-year tourism and recreational economy devoted to making sure beautiful wild places stay that way.

It wasn't always so, of course. Putting their saws to the virgin forests of northern Michigan, the timber cutters of the late 19th century produced graveyards of stumps from pine and hardwoods that once had spread their canopies to the sky. The clear-cutting of one of the continent's most magnificent forests was seen as a matter both of economic urgency and of dominion over nature. The owners of the lumber companies viewed it as their right and destiny to wantonly harvest natural resources for private financial gain.

More than a century later, that idea has no legitimacy in the state's strategy to protect the environment or promote economic well-being. Even in a down economy, land conservation is popularly seen as essential to environmental stewardship, habitat protection, economic development, and the public good. You need look no further for evidence of that point than right here in the Pigeon River Country. With few roads, and miles of trackless woods, swamps, and uncommonly clear streams, the legendary landscape that Ernest Hemingway hunted and fished is still what P.S. Lovejoy, a respected conservationist and contemporary of naturalist Aldo Leopold, called "The Big Wild."

If you're interested in donating a conservation easement or would like to learn more about land conservation in the Lake Huron basin, please visit www.lakehuronalliance.org or contact The Conservation Fund, 989-892-9171

Tax Incentive Makes Lake Conservation More Attractive

By Keith Schneider of the Michigan Land Use for the Lake Huron Alliance

BAY CITY —What steps should Michigan take to start riding the robust knowledge- and trade-driven economy that is reshaping other states, particularly those along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts?

It might be a surprise, particularly if you live amid the vast emerald forests or along the flowing waters of Michigan's Lake Huron watershed, but conserving wild lands and open space is one of them.

Three fifths of the jobs in Michigan and nationwide are directly tied to big and small metropolitan regions. The regions that are truly thriving are places that have attracted scores of high-wage information sector jobs performed in offices by highly educated knowledge workers. And one of the factors attractive to this concentration of talent, say authorities, is an abundance of open lands and green spaces.

"Green infrastructure is a key amenity in retaining and attracting talent," says Lou Glazer, president of Ann Arbor-based Michigan Future Inc., and author of a recent study calling for a new economic agenda for Michigan.

The idea that a green landscape can produce more "green" in workers pockets and public treasuries is now so firmly entrenched that it has transcended political partisanship. Last August, President George W. Bush signed a new tax law that included several provisions to give landowners, particularly those closest to cities and towns, significantly more financial incentive to donate conservation easements that permanently protect their land.

Two of Michigan's Republican lawmakers, Representative David Camp of Midland, and Representative Vernon Ehlers of Grand Rapids, played big roles in ensuring that the land conservation incentives were included in the bill.

A conservation easement is a legally binding agreement between a land conservancy and a landowner that permanently ensures the land will remain free of new development. Generally, the value of the easement is the difference between what the property would be worth if it were available for new homes and business, and what it is worth as permanent open space, forest, wetland, recreational land, or farmland.

The new tax provisions, enacted on August 17, 2006, are aimed at encouraging landowners to donate conservation easements to non-profit land trusts, six of which exist in the Lake Huron watershed. In return, a landowner receives a tax deduction worth up to half of his or her adjusted gross income. The deduction, moreover, can be taken for up to 15 years. Prior to the new tax law, the maximum deduction a landowner could take for donating an easement was 30 percent, and the deduction was in effect for just five years.

The incentives are in effect for donations made through December 31, 2007. Some of the nation's most prominent sportsmen and conservation organizations, among them American Farmland Trust, the Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, and the National Audubon Society are already calling on Congress to extend the deadline.

Michigan has 47 non-profit land conservancies eligible to receive donated conservation easements, six of them serving the counties in the Lake Huron basin. Of the 11,577 acres these groups have protected in the Lake Huron watershed, all but 486 acres were safeguarded with conservation easements. Doug Koop, executive director of The Little Forks Conservancy in Midland, said that interest in conservation easements is growing. Most of the conservation easements along Lake Huron were completed in the last five years.

It's easy to grasp why permanently setting aside land for recreation, agriculture, and natural habitat makes sense for improving the quality of life in a community. Other regions of the country, particularly the prospering Northeast, and the blazing Pacific Northwest, have gone a step further by readily embracing conservation easements as an economic development tool.

Those two regions alone accounted for almost half of the 9.4 million acres of land that was permanently protected by land conservancies, according to the latest census by the Land Trust Alliance, a national organization. It's not an accident, say economists, that the metropolitan regions of the Northeast and Pacific Northwest also are among the places attracting legions of knowledge workers, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and achieving steady job growth.

Michigan is getting the message. The state has the eighth largest number of land conservancies in the United States and ranks first in the Upper Midwest (93,730 acres as of 2003) in farmland, open space, and natural lands safeguarded from uncoordinated development. In addition to land conservancies, forward-thinking communities such as Ann Arbor, with its Greenbelt Initiative, and the Grand Rapids region have active programs to protect open space and natural areas.

Though it's lagging other states in making the transition from high paying manufacturing jobs to higher paying knowledge jobs, Michigan isn't lacking in the intellectual and natural resources that eventually will make us globally competitive again. And when that happens, we'll all be glad that landowners in the Lake Huron region had the foresight to secure the great natural spaces in and around our communities.

If you're interested in donating a conservation easement or would like to learn more about land conservation in the Lake Huron basin, please visit www.lakehuronalliance.org or contact The Conservation Fund, 989-892-9171.