



**ANN ARBOR GREENBELT DISTRICT  
STRATEGIC PLAN  
2009**

**Approved by:  
Greenbelt Advisory Commission  
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Prepared for:  
  
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## Introduction

In November 2003, residents of Ann Arbor approved a ballot proposal commonly known as the Parks and Greenbelt Ballot Proposal. The purpose of this initiative is to provide funds to preserve and protect open space, farmland, natural habitats, and the City's source waters inside and outside the city limits. In May 2004, the Ann Arbor City Council adopted Chapter 42, "Open Space and Parkland Preservation," of the Ann Arbor City Code, providing a framework for the purchase of conservation easements and fee properties within the Greenbelt District.

The Greenbelt Advisory Commission developed scoring criteria to rank the applications received. The scoring criteria focuses the selection of applications based on the following parameters:

- Characteristics of the land: type of agricultural land or mature forests, parcel size, road frontage, wetlands and / or floodplain, groundwater recharge and natural features.
- Context: proximity to city limits and other protected land, adjacent zoning and land use, scenic and / or historical value, proximity to Huron River or tributary.
- Acquisition considerations: matching funds, landowner contribution, recreation potential,.

Since the first acquisition in 2005 the Greenbelt has acquired the purchase of development rights on 6 properties totaling 648 acres and contributed funds toward the protection of 4 additional properties totaling 425 acres. In the latter instance, other entities were the lead agency to acquire either the development rights or outright purchases.

The first strategic plan for the Greenbelt District was adopted by the Greenbelt Advisory Commission in 2006. This first plan called for an emphasis on preserving large blocks of farmland within 5 designated focus areas of the Greenbelt District (see Appendix A for map), forming partnerships through Preserve Washtenaw members and other funding sources, such as Federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, and preserving land along the Huron River. This year (2009), the Greenbelt Advisory Commission is reaffirming these strategic priorities as well as calling for the protection of farmland to specifically help foster local food production within the area.

## Farmland Preservation

### ***Strategic Plan Blocks***

Agricultural land traditionally has been the most threatened land by development within the Greenbelt District. This has been due not only to the sale of individual parcels for development, but also by a need for large blocks of land to sustain agricultural production. Although there is currently little development pressure in the area, due to the real estate market and overall economic conditions, the Greenbelt Program will

continue to focus on forming 1000-acre blocks (or larger) of protected farmland in order to make agriculture viable for future producers. Thus, this strategic plan recommends a major emphasis on purchasing development rights from farmers.

The attached maps (Appendix A) outline the 5 focus area that are the most viable for farmland preservation.

These are the five blocks of prime farmland in blocks greater than 1000 acres:

1. Lodi Township Block-North of Greenbelt Boundary and west of Ann Arbor Saline Rd
2. Northern Scio, Webster Township, and east Northfield Twp Block, west of US-23 and generally north Joy Rd.
3. Northfield and Ann Arbor Townships Block east of US-23 and north of M-14
4. Salem and Superior Townships Block east of Dixboro Rd. and north of Geddes Rd.
5. Pittsfield Township, south of Ellsworth Rd.

To date, the majority of the Greenbelt acquisitions have focused on 3 of the 5 key farmland blocks, including several “anchor” sites within these areas. Anchor sites are defined as 100 acres or more that have enough agricultural land in the vicinity to form large blocks of farmland. The Greenbelt will build upon these anchor sites to provide connectivity and build larger blocks of preserved farmland. The chart below outlines the status of these farmland blocks with those acres protected and those that have been approved by City Council:

<b>Strategic Plan Block</b>	<b>Acres Completed</b>	<b>Acres Approved</b>	<b>Total Acres</b>
Web. / Scio	402	437	839
Northfield / Ann Arbor	147	0	147
Salem / Superior	296	0	296

*\*Note: These figures are for the Greenbelt related purchases only and do not take into consideration other protected property.*

While it is difficult to assign a percentage of focus of the Greenbelt acquisitions, as the program is dependent upon applications, the Greenbelt Program will strive to have approximately 90 percent of the funds focused on preserving blocks of land.

#### Goals

1. By the end of 2010, the Greenbelt will attempt to achieve the 1000 acre goal for the Webster. Scio Church Block.

2. By the end of 2011, the Greenbelt will attempt to achieve the 1000 acre goal for the Northfield/Ann Arbor Block.
3. By the end of 2015, the Greenbelt will attempt to achieve the 1000 acre goal for the Salem/Superior Township Block.

### ***Local Food or Other Crop Production***

This year, the Greenbelt Advisory Commission has identified locally produced foods, agritourism, and other agricultural specialty products sold directly to local markets as an emerging issue. Our local markets, restaurants, non-profits, and most recently, the Homegrown Festival have all focused on the environmental, health, economic and community benefits of buying and selling local foods and other agricultural specialty products. In addition, we feel that a visible connection to our Greenbelt through the foods and other products that we buy and eat provides a tangible reminder of our preservation efforts. Local foods and other crops can find their way in to our Ann Arbor economy in a number of diverse ways: the Ann Arbor Farmers Market, local food stores, direct restaurant purchases from farms, U-pick farms, and even at larger chain groceries through regional food distributors.

Recognizing that the Greenbelt's mission and direction is solely the protection of land, the Greenbelt program will make a priority to protect those farms that are producing foods for local markets. Even without this priority in our previous strategic plans, the Greenbelt program has actually preserved several farms that provide local food or other crops to the Ann Arbor area.

To date, the Greenbelt has focused on large parcels of active agriculture, however, many farms that are likely to produce vegetables or specialty crops for sale to our local markets or restaurants are likely to be less than 40 acres. Furthermore, these parcels are likely not going to qualify for Federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program grant dollars. As such, our existing scoring system precludes these types of farms from our consideration. The Greenbelt Advisory Commission will amend our scoring system to award points to those applications that are supporting local food production or direct marketing production.

#### **Goal**

1. Amend scoring criteria to provide points for local food production.
2. The Greenbelt will evaluate and approve a partnership with one local food producer, as the opportunity arises.

## **Open Space Protection**

### ***Huron River***

The protection of the Huron River is another top priority for the Greenbelt Program. The Huron River is an important recreational and natural resource in the Ann Arbor area. Over the last decade, the City has focused on protection of the land along the Huron River within the City limits. The Huron River is also part of a larger effort with Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation to establish a Border-to-Border trail through the County.

Applications received either along the Huron River or which contain tributaries of the Huron River will be a priority for the Greenbelt, recognizing the significance of the Huron River to the Ann Arbor residents as their source of drinking water.

#### **Goal**

1. The Greenbelt will partner with other local agencies on at least one Huron River property, as the opportunity arises.

### ***Viewsheds***

The Greenbelt scoring criteria awards points to applications that provide scenic views, and visibility from major corridors frequently traveled by Ann Arbor residents. Examples of these major corridors are along the highways that surround the city, which are often an entryway into the City, or routes that are frequented by bikers. The scenic value of each of the applications will continue to be a part of the scoring criteria. Furthermore, the abovementioned strategic blocks encompass major corridors, so an added benefit of forming large blocks of protected land will be preserving critical viewsheds within the Greenbelt District.

## **Preserve Washtenaw**

The Greenbelt Advisory Commission acknowledges that townships within the Greenbelt that have passed millages or dedicated funds to land preservation will play a critical role in maximizing the Greenbelt impact on the land preservation. The Greenbelt Advisory Commission recognizes that these partnerships are also key to, providing management for lands outside the City limits and to continuing the goal of developing a regional park, open space and farmland system throughout Washtenaw County.

The City of Ann Arbor's Greenbelt program is a charter member of "Preserve Washtenaw," a consortium of Washtenaw County's programs for land preservation. The Preserve Washtenaw includes all private (land conservancies) and public agencies actively protecting land in the county, through purchase (or donation) of conservation easements, or through the outright purchase of land. Active participation in Preserve Washtenaw meetings will be a key vehicle for identification of partnership opportunities to implement the objectives of the Greenbelt.

### **The purpose of Preserve Washtenaw is:**

- 1) To serve as a coordinating body for ongoing public and private land protection efforts, ensuring the highest possible level of cooperation and communication, and least possible amount of duplication and overlap.
- 2) To provide a virtual single point of entry for landowners interested in land protection and/or stewardship.
- 3) Preserve Washtenaw is advisory in nature. Its goal is to serve as a forum for establishing common priorities where feasible, leveraging available public and private resources, facilitating communications between members, and providing a clearer path of entry to citizens seeking information on resources.
- 4) From time-to-time, and as requested, Preserve Washtenaw may also provide technical advice to elected officials on public policy issues relating to land use, land protection and land stewardship.

#### Goal

1. The Greenbelt will actively participate in the quarterly meetings and host one meeting per year.
2. The Greenbelt will collaborate with Preserve Washtenaw to sign all properties where the landowners are willing to post the Preserve Washtenaw sign.

## Leveraging Funds

The Greenbelt Program will make every effort to leverage funding within the strategic priorities identified above. Leveraging fund availability will be part of the scoring criteria. In the past, this leveraging has been done by selection of applications that meet State and Federal grant criteria, as well as partnering with township and the county funded programs. The State and Federal grant funds have provided a great deal of leverage over the past few years. However, partnering with these entities adds extra time and requirements to the process. Given the decrease in land values over the past few years, the Greenbelt Advisory Commission feels that the benefit of State and Federal assistance may not always outweigh the costs of doing business with these agencies. We still place a priority on leveraging funds, but will consider applications that do not meet the State and Federal grant criteria.

Sources of potential matching funds:

- Local sources:
  - Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission
  - Ann Arbor Township Millage
  - Scio Township Millage
  - Webster Township Millage
- Federal and State Programs:
  - Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program
  - Michigan Agricultural Preservation Fund (via Township partner)

- Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund
- Department of Transportation

#### Goal

1. The Greenbelt will strive to have a cumulative match of 20% funds from non Greenbelt sources of funding.

## **Landowners**

It is critical that the City of Ann Arbor provides landowners with opportunities to maximize the funding that they receive from the transaction by providing installment sales and flexibility on closing for like-kind exchanges (1031). Many agricultural producers are using purchase of development rights funding to acquire additional property through the like-kind exchange or 1031 provision of the Internal Revenue Code. Installment sales that are available will allow landowners to spread out the payments, reducing capital gains and allowing the interest to be treated as ordinary income rather than being subject to capital gains taxes.

### ***Landowner Matching Funds***

Each landowner will be asked to consider donating a portion of their purchase of developments rights or purchase price to the program. The benefits of the donation will be explained by staff through a discussion and examples of how benefits work for landowners. .

Through 2009, there are increased tax benefits for landowners making a donation, in particular for farmers. For qualified farmers, they may deduct 100% of their adjusted gross income, if making a charitable contribution. Depending on the value of the contribution, they may carry forward the deduction for 15 years. For any landowner, they may qualify to deduct up to 50% of their adjusted income and can carry forward their deduction up to 15 years, as well.

#### Goal

1. Every landowner will be asked at least two times to consider the increased tax benefits during the course of the land negotiation.

## **Management and Monitoring**

The City of Ann Arbor will set aside an endowment fund for each purchase of development rights easement or parcel of land that is acquired with Greenbelt funds. These endowment funds will be established from millage proceeds and will be used to cover the ongoing monitoring and management costs that will be incurred by the City to ensure effective oversight of the parcels and to uphold the easement terms.

Due to the fact that other agencies or organizations may be better suited to monitor the land outside of the City limits, the endowment fund will be used to pay contractors to conduct the necessary annual monitoring and ongoing management of the sites. However, ownership of the easement deed or title to the land (depending on type of sale) will remain with the City of Ann Arbor.

***Farmland Purchase of Development Rights Easements:***

The City of Ann Arbor will bid out contracts for monitoring of the farmland easements within the Greenbelt District. A Memorandum of Understanding will be established with the agency or organization charged with monitoring the easements to ensure that the easement terms are effectively upheld. The MOUs will specify monitoring requirements and protocol and establish performance criteria that must be upheld in order to maintain the monitoring contract.

In other cases where easements were purchased, in collaboration with other townships, the individual townships may take the lead on monitoring and owning the properties acquired with the City of Ann Arbor serving as back-up in case these units default on their responsibilities.

Goal

1. Each of the Greenbelt easement purchases will be monitored yearly and spot checks will be done every three years on Farm and Ranch Program transferred easements for easement compliance.

***Open Space Fee Simple Purchases:***

The majority of the natural area and open space acquisitions along the Huron River are likely to be in collaboration with Washtenaw County, who, it is anticipated, will take the lead on management of these properties. If Washtenaw County chooses not to take the lead on monitoring, that responsibility will remain with the City of Ann Arbor and the above PDR protocol will be initiated.

## **Yearly Strategic Plan Review**

As the economic and real estate conditions are in flux, it is recommended that the strategic plan be reviewed on an annual basis and revised, as needed.

Goal

1. The Greenbelt will yearly review the annual plan.

# Attachment: Greenbelt Prime Farmland Complex Map

