

The Ann Arbor Greenbelt is a tremendous success, beyond the hopes of its backers when it was put on the ballot in 2003. Thanks to the wisdom and foresight of Ann Arbor voters, 27 properties comprising 3200 acres of farmland and open space have been preserved on the outskirts of the city, all within an hour's bike ride from downtown. Hundreds more acres will be protected in the next year.

The cost in city taxpayer funds has been approximately \$18 million, which the city has been able to leverage, obtaining approximately \$19 million in matching funds from other sources, including the federal government, Washtenaw County, townships, landowner donations, non-profits, private citizens, and businesses.

Most of the protected land is farmland, which remains private property, but to which the city now owns development rights. This land can never be subdivided or built on; it will continue to support productive agriculture and provide views, wildlife habitat, and property-tax revenue.

A decade ago, most Ann Arbor-area farmers believed they would be the last to farm their property and that upon their retirement it would become housing. Now, with a critical mass of permanently preserved farmland, farmers are investing in their operations, confident that agriculture will continue to thrive in our area.

Some of the farmers whose development rights have been bought by the city have now bought additional farmland with the proceeds, which they intend to preserve also. This creates a multiplier effect of farmland preservation from city millage funds.

Some non-farm Greenbelt properties are now owned by the county and open to recreation. This includes the popular new Scio Woods Preserve on Scio Church Rd., the Meyer Preserve in Superior Twp., and the Fox Science Preserve in Scio Twp., where thousands of Ann Arbor school students go each year to collect rocks and fossils. Expect to hear of more Greenbelt-preserved property open to recreation soon.

Just as the voters hoped, a number of properties that had been slated for urban-sprawl projects are now protected forever as farmland. The quiet Nixon farm, now preserved in Webster Twp., was once slated to be a manufactured-home development with hundreds of mobile homes. Likewise with the Braun farm, now preserved in Ann Arbor Twp. The tranquil Alexander farm in Northfield Twp. was once slated to be part of the largest housing development ever proposed in the state of Michigan, Grand Sakwa. The now-preserved Merkel farm on Joy Rd. was once proposed for a strip mall. The cooperation between the city, the county, and townships in preventing these sprawl developments has been a model that is rarely seen in Michigan, with our fragmented system of land use planning.

The Greenbelt effort has snowballed. Ann Arbor Township voters passed a land preservation millage in the same 2003 election as the city's voters. More recently, Scio, Webster, Pittsfield, and Lodi Townships have put their own money into farmland and open space preservation. In addition to the 3200 acres preserved with city funds, several thousand additional acres within the Greenbelt boundary have been protected by other entities, public and private, since the Greenbelt began, at no cost to city taxpayers. Salem Township, the latest to join the bandwagon, recently committed \$1 million of its own funds to open-space preservation over the next five years.

Voters support taxing themselves to protect land. For example, look at the overwhelming margin by which Ann Arbor voters approved the extension of the county's open space millage in 2010, as well as the handy margin by which Webster Twp's conservative voters reauthorized their own land-preservation millage in 2009, despite the economic headwind.

Now is the time to preserve land, while development values are low and the city can stretch its citizens' money. We are on target at least to double the amount of preserved land in the Greenbelt, with at least the current 1:1 matching funds ratio. The price per acre for development rights in the Greenbelt has declined from a high of \$18,000/acre in 2005 to today's \$4000-5000/acre. As my father in law always said: "Buy low".

The Greenbelt Advisory Commission and City Council have kept faith with city voters, who overwhelmingly approved the Greenbelt in 2003. We've worked hard to protect the best properties at the best prices, leveraged with the most matching funds. The Greenbelt is a project with its eye on the future, but it also provides benefits now: views, water quality, wildlife habitat, a barrier to urban sprawl, and an abiding sense of place for our city.

The Greenbelt protects places to grow food locally. This is a quality-of-life benefit that may become much more important in years to come. Bob Sutherland, owner of Cherry Republic, recently donated several thousand dollars to the city for use in the Greenbelt program. He stated that our Greenbelt, with the care it shows for local farms, epitomizes the reason he chose to locate his business in Ann Arbor.

One day, hopefully very soon, Michigan's economy will recover. When it does, it's likely that development pressure on open space and farmland will resume. Then we will realize what a beautiful emerald necklace the city has acquired. One hundred years from now, many of the issues that seem so pressing today will have faded into obscurity. Ann Arborites will look back gratefully to today's citizens for our vision in preserving the Ann Arbor Greenbelt.

Dan Ezekiel, Chair,  
Ann Arbor Greenbelt Advisory Commission