



OPEN SPACE & PARKLAND PRESERVATION PROGRAM

ACTIVITY REPORT

Fiscal Year 2019

July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019

Prepared for:

The City of Ann Arbor
Greenbelt Advisory Commission
Parks Advisory Commission

By:

The Conservation Fund

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2003, residents of Ann Arbor passed the Open Space and Parkland Preservation Millage, which authorized a tax for 30 years to provide funds for the preservation and protection of open space, natural habitats, agricultural lands, and the City's source waters outside of City limits, and the purchase of parklands within City limits. Money generated through this tax is used to purchase farmland and natural areas within portions of eight Townships surrounding Ann Arbor, known as the Greenbelt District, and to purchase parklands within the City as an addition to the City's parks system.

The Open Space and Parkland Preservation Program, also known as the Greenbelt Program, just completed its thirteenth year and is making great strides in achieving the goals set out at the beginning of the program. As of June 30, 2019, the program has acquired 128 acres of parklands. These additions to the parks system provide critical linkages between and increase access to existing parks, protect high quality natural features remaining in the City, and increase the viability of the overall park system for Ann Arbor residents. All of these are priorities for acquisition listed in the City's Parks and Recreation Open Space (PROS) Plan.

Within the Greenbelt District, the millage has helped to protect over 5,490 acres of working farmland and open space. Protecting farmland and natural areas provides many benefits to Ann Arbor residents by protecting the scenic rural vistas of the area, supporting the local agricultural economy, and protecting land within the watershed of the Huron River.

During fiscal year 2019, the millage protected an additional 270 acres of open space in the Greenbelt District.

GREENBELT

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

As directed in the Greenbelt's Strategic Plan, which was originally adopted in 2005, the program focuses on protecting large blocks (1,000 acres or greater) of contiguous farm and natural area properties by acquiring the development rights on private properties (known as conservation easements) and by acquiring public parks. Five areas, or Farmland Complexes, were defined where acquisitions that maximize these contiguous blocks of parcels are prioritized (Figure 1, Table 1). Most of the acquisitions are completed in collaborative partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies and other nonprofit organizations.

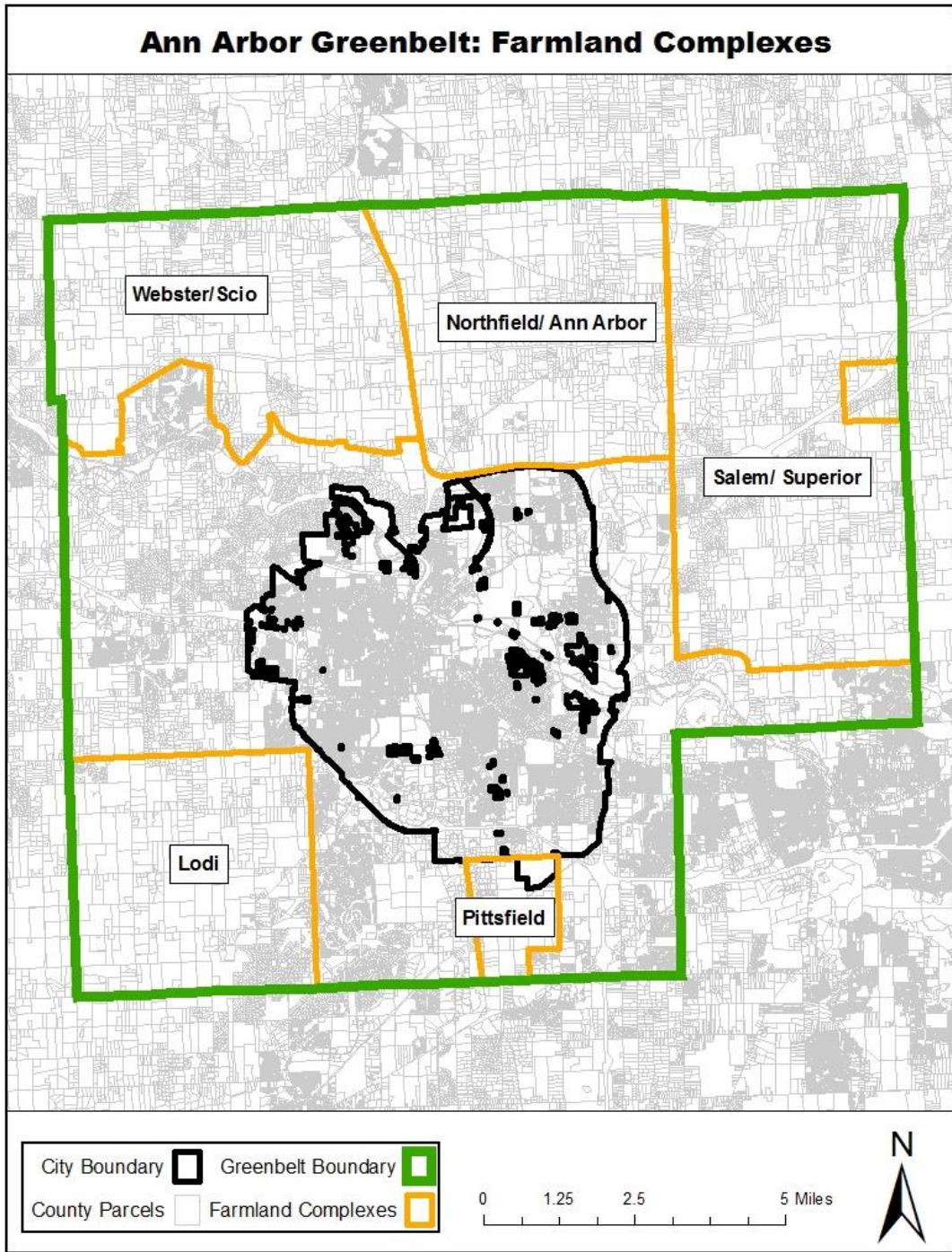


Figure 1. Farmland Complexes defined by the Greenbelt Program Strategic Plan.

Priorities outlined in the Strategic Plan continue to guide the Greenbelt Advisory Commission's recommendations to City Council on all land acquisition deals. In 2013, the Greenbelt Advisory Commission updated the Strategic Plan to include more comprehensive information on agriculture in Washtenaw County, additional details on each of the Farmland Complexes, and to prioritize community outreach about the program.

In 2008, the Greenbelt Advisory Commission modified the Strategic Plan to acknowledge the increased interest from owners (and prospective owners) of small farms and local food producers. Prior to 2008, the Greenbelt focused on farms 40 acres or larger that were eligible for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service's (USDA-NRCS) Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) grant funding. In recent years this program was replaced by the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). In addition to protecting farms larger than 40 acres, the Greenbelt Program is now also using ACEP and similar programs to protect smaller farms that directly supply products to the Ann Arbor market, thereby protecting the diversity of agricultural products available in the area.

Another top priority for land acquisitions identified by the Greenbelt Advisory Commission is the protection of the Huron River and its tributaries. The Huron River is an important natural and recreational resource in the Ann Arbor area, in addition to supplying the residents of Ann Arbor with a majority of their drinking water. Applications received in the Huron River watershed are a priority for the Greenbelt.

The Greenbelt scoring system also 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 the highways and other major entryways into the City and routes frequented by cyclists. The Farmland Complexes are bounded by major corridors, so an added benefit of forming large blocks of protected land is preserving critical viewsheds within the Greenbelt District.

LAND ACQUISITIONS

Since the inception of the Greenbelt Program, the Ann Arbor area has witnessed significant changes in the local economy and real estate market, which has affected all land acquisitions, including conservation easement transactions. The downturn in the real estate market that occurred in 2007/2008 resulted in fewer developers buying land in the area, an increase in number of properties on the market, longer property sale times, and a decrease in real estate sale prices.

In recent years, the residential real estate market has recovered, especially within Ann Arbor city limits. According to the Ann Arbor Area Board of Realtors, average home sale prices in the Ann Arbor area increased to nearly \$322,000 at the end of 2018, up from a low of around \$173,000

in 2008 (Figure 2). Developers who have been inactive in the area over the last several years, such as Toll Brothers and Biltmore, are returning to the area with current projects ranging from 26 units to almost 500 units.

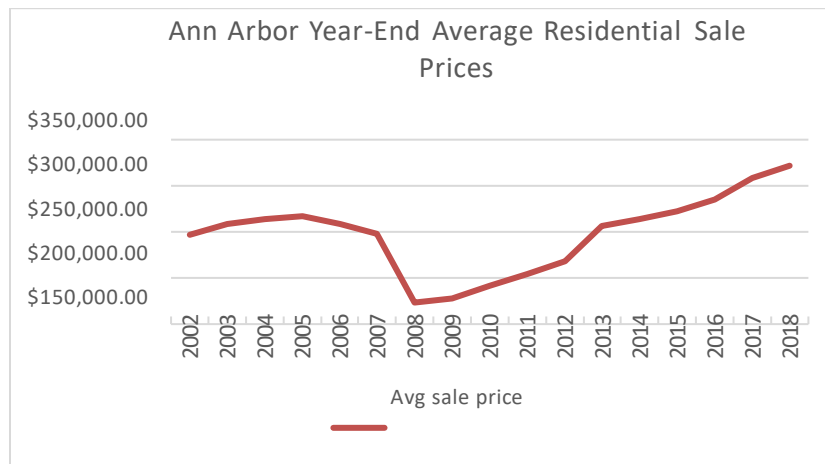


Figure 2. Ann Arbor December average residential sale prices, 2002 – 2018 (source: Ann Arbor Area Board of Realtors)

Similar to the residential real estate market, values for conservation easements also decreased after 2007, from an average per acre value of more than \$16,000 in fiscal year 2006 to a low of about \$2,700 in fiscal year 2014 (Figure 3). Since 2014, average values for conservation easements have increased to approximately \$5,800 per acre in fiscal year 2018.

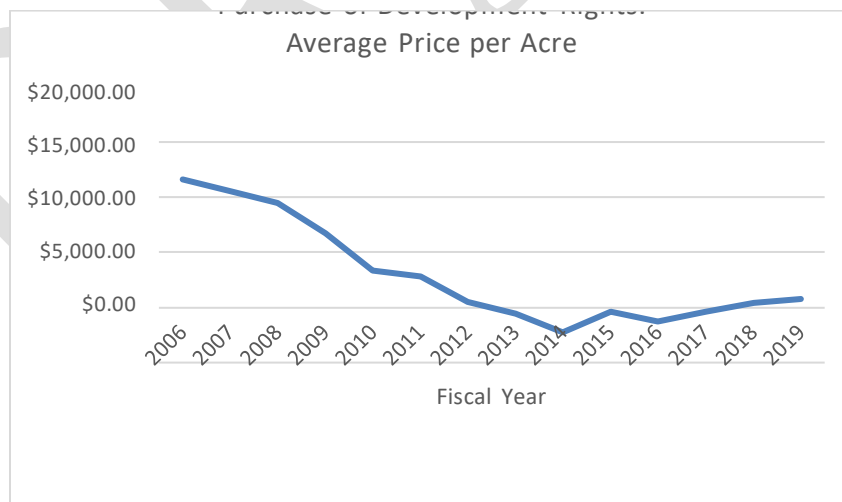


Figure 3. Average appraised values of purchase of development rights easements for the Greenbelt Program, fiscal years 2006 – 2019



GREENBELT DISTRICT: 2000 vs Present

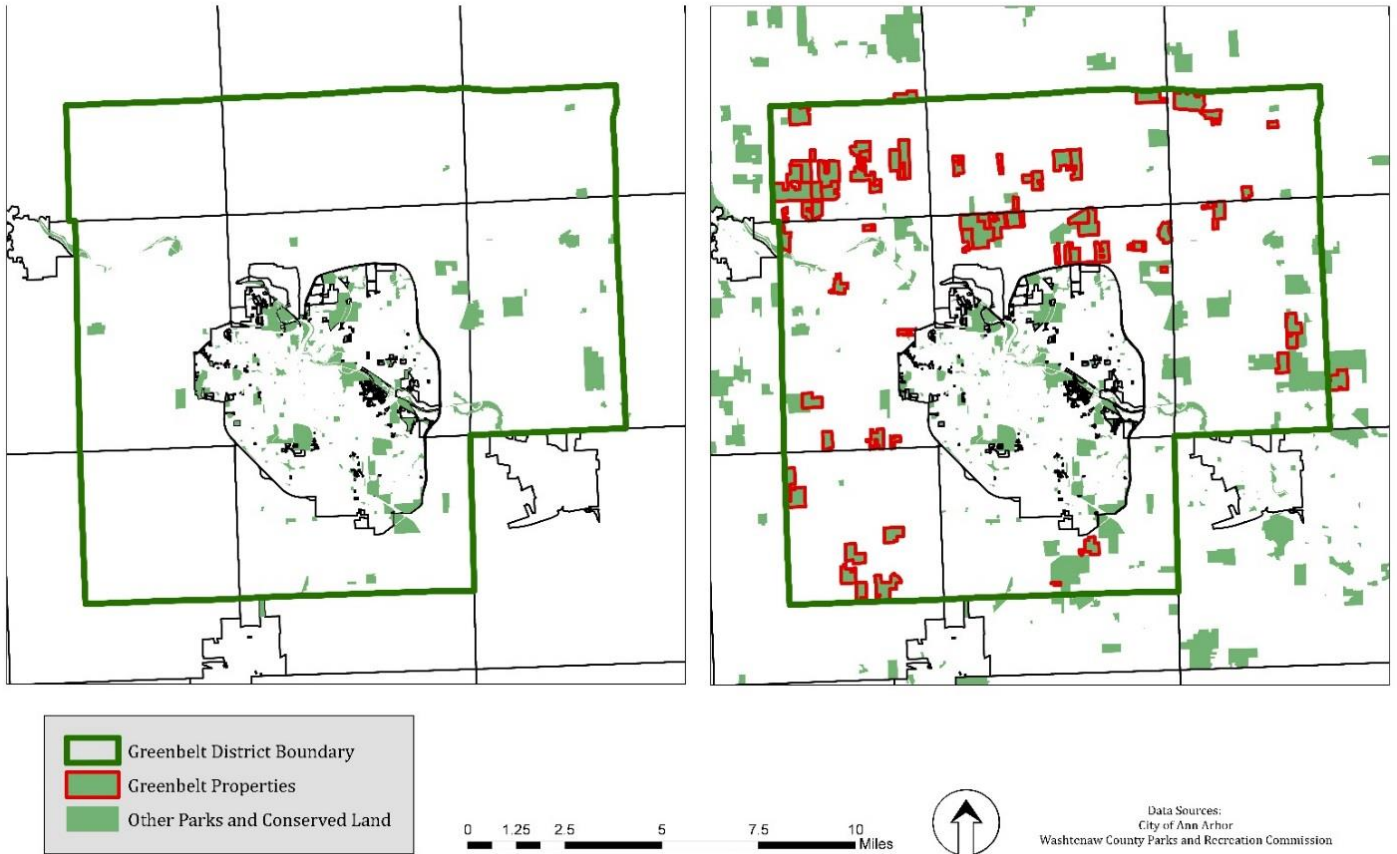


Figure 4. Properties protected in and around the Greenbelt District circa 2000 and present day (October 2019).

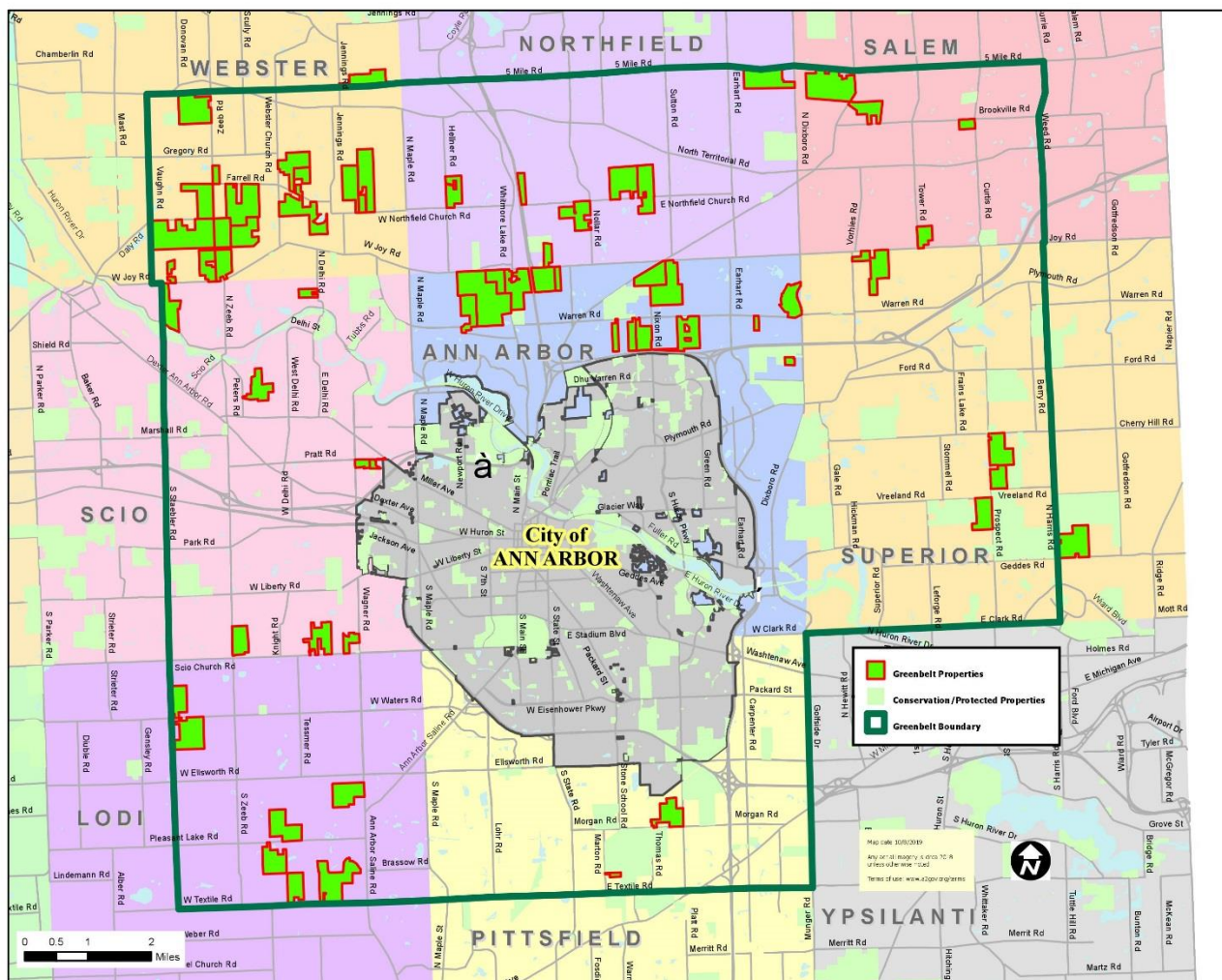


Figure 5. Properties protected by the Greenbelt Program through June 30, 2019

As of June 30, 2019, the Greenbelt Program has helped to protect more than 5,490 acres of working farms and natural areas (Figure 4). The cumulative fair market value of these properties is over \$49.1 million, of which more than \$25.9 million, or 52%, were contributed by other local and federal organizations, enabling the City to maximize and leverage the use of the millage dollars. Matching funds are often secured through collaboration with other organizations and local, state, and federal agencies, and for several transactions the landowners themselves

contributed a portion of the purchase price by selling the development rights at bargain sale prices.

During fiscal year 2019 the Greenbelt Program completed four acquisitions, protecting a total of 269 acres of natural areas and working farmland:

- ***Purchase of Two Farmland Conservation Easements:*** The Greenbelt Program purchased two conservation easements:
 1. *Seeley Farm:* 27-acres in Ann Arbor Township. Seeley Farm in produces food for local Ann Arbor markets and restaurants. Funds were also contributed by Washtenaw County’s Parks and Recreation Commission. The property includes both active farmland and woodlands.
 2. *Drake Farm (North):* 71-acre farm in Lodi Township, adjacent to the Greenbelt’s Drake Farm (South) conservation easement. . Funds were also contributed by the USDA – NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Washtenaw County’s Parks and Recreation Commission and Lodi Township.
- ***Partnership with Webster Township and Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation:*** Webster Township was the lead on a project that protected 145 acres of farmland adjacent to another existing protected property, adding to a block of protected farmland in the Webster Township area. The property is owned by the Carol Smith Trust. Washtenaw County’s Parks and Recreation Commission and Webster Township also contributed funds.
- ***Partnership with Washtenaw County, Legacy Land Conservancy and Salem Township:*** Legacy Land Conservancy was the lead on a project that protected 25 acres of high-quality woodlands and wetlands in Salem Township. Now known as the Shatter Nature Preserve, the property is now owned and managed as a public nature preserve by Legacy Land Conservancy. Washtenaw County’s Parks and Recreation Commission and the Greenbelt Program split the cost of acquisition, with Legacy Land Conservancy becoming the long-term owner and manager of the public preserve

LEVERAGING FUNDS

AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROGRAM (ACEP)

The City successfully submitted one application to the USDA-NRCS’s Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to provide a portion of the funds towards the purchase of agricultural conservation easements on the property. This acquisition is expected to close in fiscal year 2020.

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (RCPP)

The Greenbelt Program was the lead entity in an application for funding from USDA-NRCS's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), with partners also including Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission, Legacy Land Conservancy, Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy, Ann Arbor Township, Scio Township, Augusta Township, and The Conservation Fund. The partnership was awarded \$1.04 million for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements under the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. These funds will be available to the partnership for five years and complements the Huron River RCPP, which secured \$1.8 million in USDA-NRCS program funds under the lead of Legacy Land Conservancy in Fiscal Year 2017.

LOCAL PARTNERS

As discussed above, the Greenbelt partnered with the USDA – NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Webster Township, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission, and Lodi Township for transactions completed this fiscal year. In total, partners contributed more than \$1,074,000, or 61%, of the purchase prices for the projects completed this year.

PUBLIC AND LANDOWNER OUTREACH

In addition to outreach to landowners within the Greenbelt District, the Greenbelt Commission and staff have increased efforts to reach out to the general public in Ann Arbor. In fiscal year 2019, Commissioners and staff participated in local events to spread the word about the Greenbelt, including the Mayor's Green Fair in June 2019.

Due to a transition in staff, the annual bus tour was postponed until fiscal year 2020. However, the Greenbelt Program has started to post "Virtual Tours" online. With the help of a drone, City residents can now take a bird's-eye tour properties preserved by the Greenbelt Program.

In Fiscal Year 2019 the program had hosted a University of Michigan graduate student intern over the summer, who helped analyze the multitudes of success achieved by the Greenbelt Program by using ArcGIS and other methods of data analysis.

FINANCIAL SPREADSHEET

See Appendix A for detailed financial reports.

STEWARDSHIP FUNDS

For each conservation easement, approximately \$24,000 are set aside in a separate endowment fund. Since conservation easements are required to be monitored annually in perpetuity, these endowment funds are used to cover the monitoring costs, in addition to funding any potential costs to enforce easement terms and respond to easement violations in the future. As of June 30, 2019, the balance in the Greenbelt's endowment fund was \$767,989.

STATUS OF GOALS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2019

BUILDING BLOCKS OF PROTECTED PROPERTIES

- *Complete at least three transactions this year in the Greenbelt's strategic plan blocks.*
 - FOUR TRANSACTIONS WERE COMPLETED THIS YEAR, ALL OF WHICH WERE LOCATED IN A STRATEGIC PLAN BLOCK.

LEVERAGING FUNDS

- *Apply for USDA Agriculture Conservation Easement Program grant funds on at least two properties.*
 - THE CITY APPLIED FOR GRANT FUNDS ON ONE PROPERTY
- *Secure at least 20% matching funds on all transactions completed.*
 - 61% MATCHING FUNDS WERE SECURED ON AVERAGE FOR DEALS COMPLETED THIS YEAR.
- *Secure at least one partner for all transactions.*
 - THE CITY PARTNERED WITH WASHTENAW COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION, WEBSTER TOWNSHIP, LODI TOWNSHIP, AND NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION SERVICE. ALL TRANSACTIONS COMPLETED HAD AT LEAST ONE PARTNER.

OUTREACH

- *Organize annual Bus Tour in spring 2019.*
 - DELAYED UNTIL FALL 2019 DUE TO STAFF TRANSITION.
- *Have table at HomeGrown Festival and any other event, as appropriate.*
 - THE HOMEGROWN FESTIVAL WAS NOT HELD THIS YEAR. THE GREENBELT PROGRAM HAD A TABLE AT THE MAYOR'S GREEN FAIR.

GOALS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2020

BUILDING BLOCKS OF PROTECTED PROPERTIES

- *Complete at least three transactions in Fiscal Year 2020 in the Greenbelt's strategic plan blocks.*

LEVERAGING FUNDS

- *Apply for USDA Agricultural Conservation Easement grant funds on at least two properties.*
- *Secure at least 33% matching funds on all transactions completed.*
- *Secure at least one partner for each transaction.*

OUTREACH

- *Engage public in Strategic Plan update initiated by the Greenbelt Advisory Commission.*
- *Have table at Mayor's Green Fair and any other event, as appropriate.*

PARKLANDS

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Ann Arbor's Parks and Recreation Open Space (PROS) Plan lists the following criteria for evaluating future parkland acquisitions. Please refer to the PROS Plan for more details on each criterion.

1. City-wide System Balance / Geographic Distribution as well as Open Space Convenient to Each Neighborhood
2. Natural Resource Protection
3. Open Space and Green Space Imagery/Aesthetics
4. Enhance Access and Linkage
5. Protection of the Huron River, Watersheds, and Water Quality
6. Recreation Value and Suitability for Intended Use
7. Method of Acquisition/Direct Costs
8. Provides for Future Needs/Anticipates Growth
9. Long-Term Development and Maintenance Costs

LAND ACQUISITIONS

The City of Ann Arbor completed three parkland acquisitions this fiscal year, totaling 19.65 acre of parkland added to the City:

1. *Buttonbush Nature Area*: In March, 2019 the 16.07 acre parcel was in large part purchased by the City of Ann Arbor from Toll MI VI Limited Partnership, and a smaller section was donated. The property consists mainly of dry-mesic forest dominated by oaks and hickories. A large buttonbush swamp lies in the central portion of the site, and a stream flows to the south from the swamp. North of the swamp, several vernal pools provide habitat for amphibians. The property is connected to Foxfire South Park on its western edge, and is not far from Oakwoods Nature Area to the east, which makes it an important link in the habitat corridor in the northeast area of Ann Arbor. Many interesting species can be found in this park, including wild turkey, wood thrush, wood frog, salamander species, bladdernut, swamp white oak, black ash, and turtlehead. In addition, the federally-threatened Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake has been observed in adjacent Foxfire South, and a Duke's skipper butterfly, which is a protected threatened species in Michigan, was observed in the buttonbush swamp in 2002.
2. *Hickory Nature Area*: In March, 2019 the 2.07 acre parcel was donated to the City of Ann Arbor by Pulte Homes of Michigan, LLC. The property consists of dry-mesic

forest dominated by oaks and hickories, including a small grove of hickories on its western edge. The forest is notable because it contains many large landmark trees, such as white oaks, shagbark hickories, and sugar maples, which had been part of a fencerow around the property when it was a farm field in the first half of the 1900s. The property is the first acquisition in what could potentially become a larger network of protected natural areas providing connections to the Huron Parkway Right-of-Way and Onder Nature Area to the south and Leslie Park and Black Pond Woods Nature Area to the east. Such connections are beneficial to the movements of both wildlife and park users.

3. *Hansen Nature Area (Addition)*: Avalon Housing, Inc. donated the 1.51 acre addition to the City's Hansen Nature Area in May 2019.

FINANCIAL SPREADSHEET

See Appendix A for details.

STATUS OF GOALS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2019

- *Complete at least one transaction.*
 - THREE TRANSACTIONS WERE COMPLETED THIS FISCAL YEAR

GOALS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2020

- *Complete at least two parkland acquisitions in Fiscal Year 2020:*
 - *One new park*
 - *One addition to existing parkland*
- *In Fiscal Year 2020, initiate a strategic planning process that:*
 - *Collects and utilizes public input on parkland acquisitions within the City of Ann Arbor*
 - *Establishes goals for the Land Acquisition Committee*
 - *Informs possible changes to the scoring system used by staff and PAC's Land Acquisition Committee to evaluate properties for both Active Park and Natural Area acquisitions*
 - *Guides future outreach efforts related to parkland acquisitions*
 - *Informs updates to the City's Parks and Recreation Open Space (PROS) Plan.*

About The Conservation Fund

The City of Ann Arbor has worked with The Conservation Fund since 2004 to administer and implement the Greenbelt Program.

At The Conservation Fund, we make conservation work for America. By creating solutions that make environmental and economic sense, we are redefining conservation to demonstrate its essential role in our future prosperity. Top-ranked for efficiency and effectiveness, we have worked in all 50 states since 1985 to protect more than 8 million acres of land.

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APPENDIX A: FISCAL YEAR 2019 FINANCIAL REPORT

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