

the ann arbor chronicle

it's like being there

July 19, 2011

Proposal Would Expand Greenbelt Boundaries

Advisory group weighs recommendations for city council

By MARY MORGAN

Ann Arbor greenbelt advisory commission meeting (July 13, 2011): After discussing several options to expand the boundaries of Ann Arbor's greenbelt program, members of the greenbelt advisory commission (GAC) ultimately voted to postpone action until their next meeting. Several commissioners expressed a desire to give the proposal more thought. One issue raised was whether extending the boundaries would cause Ann Arbor taxpayers to feel that their dollars are being spent to preserve land too far away from the city.

A subcommittee of GAC has been evaluating a potential greenbelt boundary change since November 2010. Options included expanding in Salem Township and Lodi Township to "square" off the boundaries, and allowing properties adjacent to the greenbelt to be eligible for the program. Another option would be to create a one-mile "buffer" around the existing boundaries, and include properties within that buffer if they met stricter criteria. Whatever recommendation GAC eventually makes would require Ann Arbor city council approval.

Also at July's meeting, commissioners got an update on Scio Township's land preservation efforts from Barry Lonik (a consultant who works with the township) and Bruce Manny (a member of the

township's land preservation commission). Lonik noted that the township's 10-year, half-mill land preservation millage expires in 2014. The land preservation commission would like to get a renewal on the November 2012 ballot, to coincide with higher voter turnout for the presidential election.



Liz Rother attended her first meeting as an Ann Arbor greenbelt advisory commissioner on July 13. Her appointment was approved by the city council in June – she replaced Jennifer S. Hall, whose term had expired and who was term limited.

It was the first meeting for GAC's newest commissioner, Liz Rother, who was appointed by the city council in June to

replace term-limited Jennifer Santi Hall. Another position, held by former GAC member Gil Omenn, remains vacant. Dan Ezekiel – who was elected GAC’s chair at the meeting – urged anyone who’s interested in serving on the commission to contact their city councilmember.

During his communications to fellow commissioners, Ezekiel noted the recent death of “Grandpa” Don Botsford, calling him a real pioneer and champion of land preservation in this area. Botsford was man who lived in poverty rather than sell his land to developers, Ezekiel said. He eventually sold part of his property’s development rights to Scio Township, in partnership with Ann Arbor’s greenbelt program – it’s now known as the Botsford Recreational Preserve, near M-14 and Miller Road. Botsford introduced thousands of people to the natural environment, Ezekiel said, so it was fitting to note his contribution and his passing.

Scio Township Land Preservation

Barry Lonik and Bruce Manny of the Scio Township land preservation commission had been invited to give GAC members an update on land preservation efforts in the township. They were asked specifically to update GAC about how Scio Township is prioritizing its acquisitions to preserve land. Lonik – of Treemore Ecology and Land Services – is a consultant for Scio Township, working on land preservation issues.

The prioritizing process took about a year and was just recently completed, Lonik said. The commission had reviewed applications they’d previously received but hadn’t acted on. Since Scio Township voters had approved a land preservation millage in 2004, the township had completed nine projects, he said, but there are about two

dozen others that the commission hasn’t acted on. These applications hadn’t received high scores on the scoring system that the township uses to rate potential acquisitions. For some of them, Scio Township had approached potential funding partners, he said, but no one had been interested, and the applications languished.

In taking a closer look, Lonik said he realized that the applications weren’t the greatest properties. It seemed the land preservation program wasn’t attracting higher priority properties in the township. So at that point, the commission started a process of prioritizing. Lonik referenced a May 2010 memo he’d written to the township land preservation commission, recommending critical factors to consider in the three land categories allowed by the land preservation ordinance: farmland, open space, and potential park properties. From the memo:

Farmland critical factors

- proximity to protected land: properties in the vicinity of protected agricultural properties, including areas in adjacent townships.
- viable agricultural operation: properties where a functional agricultural business is located or is integral to a business.
- blocks of farmland: located along the northern, southern and western boundaries, including areas in adjacent townships.
- scenic: visible from publicly accessible areas (roads primarily).
- soils: highest quality soils for agricultural production.
- size: properties large enough to utilize modern farm equipment.

Open space critical factors

- Huron River Watershed Council bioreserve area: high or medium priority.
- water quality protection: containing a seasonal or perennial stream, or wetlands that provide stream buffers and/or serve as headwater areas.
- corridors and blocks: properties that could add to existing blocks or provide links for wildlife and/or people.
- public access: properties that could be purchased and made available to the public.
- scenic: visible from publicly accessible areas (roads primarily).
- parcel size: properties of a sufficient size that important features could be protected.
- development potential: properties on which structures could be built, which would diminish open space values.

Park critical factors

- size: a regional park large enough to accommodate developed recreational activities.
- location: a more central location to provide easy access to the greatest number of residents.
- visibility: to provide a feeling of safety and for easy way-finding.
- topographic features: a sizable number of acres must be fairly flat to develop sports fields.
- surrounding land use: proximity to higher density residential was a positive, while either entirely rural surroundings or scattered large lot residential was not.
- features diversity: having features such as forest fragments, streams and ponds as well as large open space for active recreation.

- access: properties along major corridors were given a higher rating than property along gravel roads and along minor, less traveled roadways.

Lonik said he's tromped around Scio Township for about 15 years, and has a good sense for where higher priority properties are located. He developed the list of critical factors – outlined in the May 2010 memo – by using his own knowledge of the area, the ordinance requirements, and the scoring system that's been used by the township land preservation commission.



Barry Lonik, a consultant for Scio Township, talks about land preservation priorities for the township.

He said he then listed each property that had any natural resource value in the township, and assigned each property a high, medium or low priority in each category of land (open space, farmland or parkland). Lonik said he didn't want to publicize the list of landowners at this point, even though the township isn't actively trying to acquire these properties.

The township also hired Carlisle/Wortman Associates, an Ann Arbor-based planning firm, to develop a series of maps, which

show where the priority properties are located in relation to: (1) bioreserve areas in the township; and (2) the township's master plan designations. Another map shows the high priority properties in relation to areas that are already protected – either by the township's programs or others. One map shows only the high priority properties in each category, and another map indicates the location of all priority properties – high, medium and low.

Some applications are already in hand for properties that have been identified as high priority, Lonik said. In addition, the township has sent letters and applications to landowners of all high, medium and low priority properties, asking them to apply to the land preservation program. Finally, Lonik said he'll be personally contacting the owners of all land designated as high priority, to encourage them to apply. Often, people are reluctant to apply to a program blindly, without first establishing a relationship and getting more information, Lonik said.

He thanked GAC members for the partnerships the greenbelt program has already done with Scio Township, and said he looked forward to many more. Lonik noted that the township's 10-year, half-mill land preservation millage expires in 2014. The land preservation commission would like to get a renewal on the November 2012 ballot, to coincide with higher voter turnout for the presidential election. It's likely a renewal will pass, Lonik said, given the history of support for land preservation by township residents. The original millage passed with 76% of the vote, and the more recent countywide millage for the Washtenaw County natural areas preservation program was supported by 63% of voters in Scio Township.

Scio Township Land Preservation: Commissioner Discussion

In response to a question from Catherine Riseng, Lonik said that of all the high priority properties, only four are for possible parks – most are open space parcels. The township doesn't own any park properties, Lonik noted, but that's of interest in the future, assuming that township officials can find land with the right qualities – located with easy access to the township's population centers, with a mix of open land for fields as well as natural areas. Not many properties meet those criteria, Lonik noted. Of the roughly 100 priority properties he's identified through this process, about two-thirds of them are open space, as opposed to farmland or potential parkland.

In response to a query from Dan Ezekiel, Lonik told commissioners that about 8,400 acres of farmland have been preserved countywide in the past 15 years or so. That amount includes land protected by a variety of programs, including township preservation millages, Ann Arbor's greenbelt program, Washtenaw County parks & recreation, the county's natural areas preservation program, state easements and land conservancies. By next year, that number will likely push past 10,000 acres, Lonik said. It's really extraordinary, he said, considering that the first deal occurred just recently, in 1997, when the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy protected property at the corner of Prospect and Geddes roads. He noted that Manny's farm on Parker Road in Scio Township was among the first farms to be preserved.

Ezekiel observed that the greenbelt program had participated in protecting 3,200 acres. He then asked whether Lonik knew if Saginaw Forest – a property in Scio Township that's owned by the University of Michigan – is protected through a

conservation easement. It's not, Lonik said, nor have township officials approached the university about that possibility. In Michigan, state law requires that public entities like UM dispose of their assets at market value, he said – UM couldn't just donate the property. However, it's possible that the township or city could buy a conservation easement, if they wanted to, he said.

Ezekiel thanked Lonik for coming, and said it would be great if other townships within the greenbelt did this kind of work. GAC was open to suggestions for partnering on properties in Scio Township, he said, adding that the city was very proud of the properties it had already partnered on with the township: the Fox Science Preserve, Scio Woods Preserve, and the Botsford Recreational Preserve.

Ezekiel also wished Lonik a happy 50th birthday.

Greenbelt Boundaries

At GAC's November 2010 meeting, commissioners formed a subcommittee to explore possible changes to the existing boundary of the greenbelt district. The intent would be to give the program greater flexibility in protecting desirable properties that fall just outside the current boundaries. [.pdf map of existing greenbelt district] Any changes recommended by GAC would need approval by the Ann Arbor city council before taking effect. Since the Open Space and Parkland Preservation millage passed in 2003, the council has expanded the boundaries once, in August 2007, by bumping out the boundary by a mile.

In introducing the topic at GAC's July 13 meeting, Ginny Trocchio of The Conservation Fund – which has a contract with the city to manage the greenbelt

program – explained the rationale for the subcommittee's recommendations. She said the subcommittee looked at maps of larger properties inside and outside of the greenbelt, reviewing what's already been protected and identifying other potential greenbelt property that's in the Huron River watershed and that contains other natural features.

Trocchio reviewed the subcommittee's two recommended options:

Option 1:

1. Expand the boundaries in Salem Township and Lodi Township to “square” off the boundaries. The Salem Township boundary would be extended 1 mile to the east so the eastern Greenbelt boundary would be consistent with Superior Township. The Lodi Township boundary would be extended 1 mile to the west and 1 mile to the south so the boundaries would be consistent with Scio Township and Pittsfield Township.

2) Additionally, to allow one of the following: a) Greenbelt's participation on any property that is adjacent to the Greenbelt boundary, or b) Greenbelt's participation on any property that is adjacent to the Greenbelt boundary, or extends a contiguous block of contiguous protected land, that is within the Greenbelt boundary.

Option 2:

1) Expand the boundaries in Lodi Township and Salem Township as described above.

2) Create a 1-mile buffer area surrounding the Greenbelt boundary to allow the Greenbelt's participation, for exceptional properties or if stricter criteria are met. The specific criteria are still to be determined, but examples included: a) if there is a local partner willing to take the lead; b) if it

extends a block of protected properties that originates in the Greenbelt boundary; c) significant for protection of Huron River Watershed; d) higher percentage of matching funds; e) or limiting the percentage of funds expended in “buffer” area.

Lodi Township has expressed more of a willingness to work with the greenbelt program in recent years, Trocchio said, even though that township doesn't have a dedicated millage for land preservation. There are also some great, large farmland parcels in Lodi, she noted. Salem Township is also considering more financial contributions to land preservation, possibly by earmarking \$200,000 annually from the township's landfill revenue for that purpose, she said.

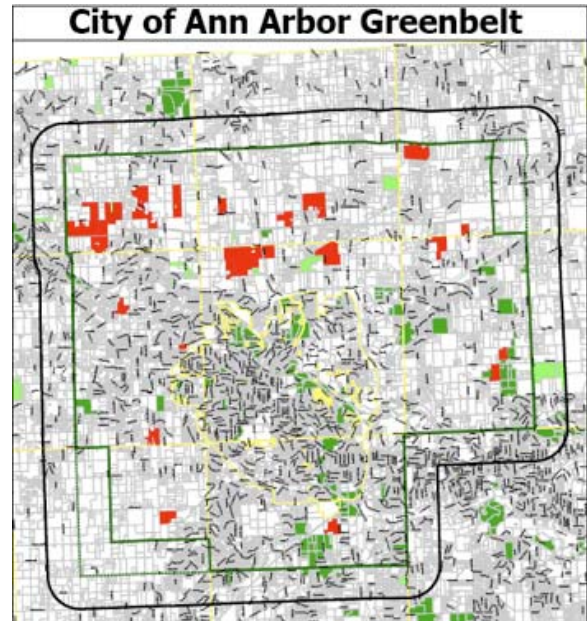
Greenbelt Expansion: Commissioner Discussion

Peter Allen began by saying he didn't see any downside to Option 2 – were there any? Trocchio said the one possible objection would be that an expanded boundary would push protected land farther away from the city.

Dan Ezekiel, who chaired the boundary subcommittee, noted that distance from the city was a matter of degree. Everything within the expanded boundary would still be within an easy hour bike ride from downtown Ann Arbor – that's his rule of thumb. He also noted the greenbelt program had vastly more partnership opportunities now than when the program started with the original boundaries. For example, Washtenaw County's natural areas preservation program (NAPP) was modified last year to allow the county to spend up to 25% of its millage on the purchase of development rights for farmland. [See Chronicle coverage of a presentation on the

county's efforts at GAC's March 2011 meeting.]

Laura Rubin asked whether there's been a decrease in applications to the program from landowners within the existing greenbelt boundaries. No, Trocchio said – the program completed an unprecedented number of deals last year.



Map of Ann Arbor greenbelt with potential expanded boundaries. The solid green line indicates the current boundary. The dotted green lines in the lower left (Lodi Township) and upper right (Salem Township) indicate proposed "bump outs." The black line indicates a potential one-mile buffer zone.

In that case, Rubin said, one of the cons to expanding the boundaries might be that there are still opportunities for protecting land closer to the city, closer to Ann Arbor taxpayers who are paying for the program.

Mike Garfield said that one issue is interpreting the intent of Ann Arbor voters who approved the millage. The original boundaries were set more by art than science, he noted. Garfield said he didn't have a strong opinion about it, but that it made sense to take advantage of opportunities – when valuable properties become available, it's beneficial to be able

to act, as long as the properties aren't too far from the city. He pointed out that the last time GAC considered expansion, he resisted expanding the boundaries in Lodi Township, because township officials hadn't been receptive to the program. That's now changed, he said. It looks like there are a lot of properties worth protecting in the expanded areas. While the program needs boundaries, it hurts not to be able to protect land that's close, but not within the borders.

Allen suggested supporting Option 2. Tom Bloomer then weighed in, saying he wasn't necessarily opposed to the expansion, but he wanted more time to think about it. He was particularly interested in flexibility for properties adjacent to the greenbelt, owned by the same person. Bloomer, a Webster Township farmer, was less certain about a general geographic expansion of the boundaries – he said he didn't want to just keep expanding, because it runs the risk of diluting the program's efforts.

Ezekiel pointed to one example of a property owner holding land on both sides of a road – one parcel was within the greenbelt boundary, the other was not. The greenbelt program was able to secure matching federal funds for the portion within the greenbelt, but not for the adjacent land that fell outside the boundary.

Carsten Hohnke, a commissioner who also represents Ward 5 on Ann Arbor city council, supported Bloomer's desire to postpone action. He cited concerns he's heard expressed by people who feel there's still land that can be preserved within the existing boundaries, closer to the city. Though it isn't explicit in the ordinance, he said, there was a good community discussion before the 2003 vote about where the boundaries would be, and that needs to be taken into account. He thought the notion

of loosening language to allow for protecting properties contiguous to the greenbelt made sense, in that it would eliminate the “across the street” issue.

Ezekiel clarified that whatever recommendation is made by GAC would be forwarded to the Ann Arbor city council for approval. He noted that when the original greenbelt boundaries were set, GAC almost immediately found the boundaries too constraining. He wished that Lodi and Salem townships had been included in the 2007 expansion, but the thinking at that time was to expand into areas where townships were willing to partner.

Allen asked Trocchio to estimate how much land within the existing greenbelt boundary has already been protected – 50%? 80%? Trocchio guessed it was probably closer to 20%. Garfield noted that the intent was never to get conservation easements on 100% of farmland and open space. The original idea was to stop sprawl, he said, to help farmers stay on their land and make their operations viable. If there are large blocks of protected farmland, he said, the thought was that it would have a ripple effect that would prevent development.

Bloomer observed that identifying a percentage is a moving target, because the program is voluntary. Land is only “available” for protection if the landowner is interested in being part of the greenbelt program. In the greenbelt's early days, almost no land was available, he said, because people weren't familiar with the program. It would be hard to measure a percentage, even now.

Trocchio offered to organize a field trip for commissioners, taking them out to see the proposed expansion and the land that might be available if the boundaries are changed.

Ezekiel supported that idea, and said he sensed that commissioners were reluctant to proceed at this meeting. Hohnke then made a motion to postpone, which was seconded by Allen.

Outcome: Commissioners voted unanimously to postpone a vote on the greenbelt boundary expansion until GAC's next meeting. A meeting is scheduled for Aug. 10, but might be cancelled if a quorum can't be achieved.

Election of Officers, Seeking Another Member

Dan Ezekiel, who has served as GAC's vice chair for the past year, chaired the July meeting and was nominated as chair. Catherine Riseng was nominated vice chair, after Laura Rubin confirmed that Riseng was willing to do it. Riseng said that although she had concerns about the time commitment, she'd be willing to give it a try – unless any of the other commissioners were “gung-ho” to do it. (Apparently they were not.)

Outcome: Dan Ezekiel and Catherine Riseng were unanimously elected chair and vice chair, respectively.

Ezekiel welcomed Liz Rother to GAC, replacing Jennifer Santi Hall, whose term expired on June 30 and who was prevented by the ordinance that established the greenbelt program from seeking additional terms. Both she and Gil Omenn, who also stepped down from GAC as of June 30, had been term limited. Ezekiel noted that Rother was an accomplished gardener and beekeeper, and had been attending GAC meetings for several months before her appointment was approved by city council at their June 20 meeting.

Three seats on GAC are open to the general

public, Ezekiel said – he and Rother now fill two of those seats. But a third general public seat – previously held by Omenn – remains open. The commission's work is nowhere near completion, he said, and it's important work. The term runs for three years, and members can serve two consecutive terms. Anyone who's interested in volunteering can contact their Ann Arbor city councilmember. Unlike most other city commissions, in which members are nominated by the mayor and confirmed by council, greenbelt commissioners are both nominated and confirmed by the city council.

Communications: Remembering Don Botsford

During the July 13 meeting, Dan Ezekiel noted the recent death of “Grandpa” Don Botsford, calling him a real pioneer and champion of land preservation in this area.

By way of additional background, Botsford, 82, died on June 27. He was known for generations for the Ann Arbor Gymkana, which closed in 1986, and for his enthusiasm for spaceball – a game combining elements of basketball and volleyball, played on a trampoline. The Chronicle visited Botsford two years ago: “Back to the Future with Spaceball.” The article quotes Washtenaw County prosecuting attorney Brian Mackie, who played competitive spaceball under Botsford's tutelage in the 1960s.

Botsford was man who lived in poverty rather than sell his land to developers, Ezekiel said. He eventually sold development rights to part of his property in Scio Township – it's now known as the Botsford Recreational Preserve, near M-14 and Miller Road. Botsford introduced thousands of people to the natural

environment, Ezekiel said, so it was fitting to note his contribution and his passing.

Communications: More Notes from the Chair

Ezekiel also noted that GAC's June 16 open house at the Braun farm went well – certificates were presented to several landowners who had participated in the greenbelt program. The Braun farm in Ann Arbor Township is one of the greenbelt's more recent protected properties.



Ginny Trocchio of The Conservation Fund, which manages Ann Arbor's greenbelt program, talks with Dan Ezekiel, who was elected chair of the greenbelt advisory commission at the July 13 meeting.

Ezekiel commended the work of Lisa Gottlieb and Jeff McCabe, who recently completed their “20 hoops in 20 days” effort to build hoop houses at local farms – including some located within the greenbelt. Ezekiel reminded commissioners that the couple, who also run the Friday breakfast salon Selma Cafe, had made a presentation about the hoop house project at GAC's November 2010 meeting. It was a tremendous achievement, Ezekiel said.

Later in the meeting, Ezekiel noted that Bob Sutherland, owner of Cherry Republic – which recently opened a downtown Ann Arbor store at the corner of Main and Liberty – wants to contribute \$2,500 toward

land preservation in the greenbelt. The city welcomes these kinds of contributions from private businesses, he said.

Communications: Staff Report

Ginny Trocchio reported that the greenbelt program had received \$312,620 from the federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) to help pay for the purchase of development rights on the 110-acre Lindemann-Weidmayer farm in Lodi Township. That deal will be going to the city council soon, she said. [The council approved the deal at its July 18, 2011 meeting.]

Trocchio also told commissioners that Gov. Rick Snyder has signed the farmland preservation bill (Public Act 79). The law provides incentives to farmers to pay back defaulted Public Act 116 agreements. Farmers who enroll in Michigan's Farmland and Open Space Protection Program (PA 116) get tax incentives. However, if they quit the program they must repay the state – if not, the state puts a lien against their property, Trocchio explained. Until now, there hasn't been a way for the state to collect those funds. Payments would be added to the state's Agriculture Preservation Fund, which is used to make grants to local communities for the purchase of farmland conservation easements.

Proposed Greenbelt Acquisitions

Near the end of the meeting, commissioners went into a closed session to discuss land acquisitions. They emerged after about 45 minutes and voted on two resolutions:

1. a resolution recommending that the city council approve spending up to \$121,365 in partnership with Webster Township for the purchase of development rights (PDR) on a property that's in close proximity to other greenbelt parcels.

2. a resolution recommending that the city council approve spending up to \$49,500 in partnership with Ann Arbor Township for the purchase of development rights (PDR) on a property in that township.

The properties were identified only by application number – 2011-03 and 2011-02, respectively. The location of the properties and their owners aren't revealed until the resolutions are voted on by the city council.

Outcome: Commissioners unanimously approved the two land acquisition recommendations.

Present: Peter Allen, Tom Bloomer, Dan Ezekiel, Mike Garfield, Carsten Hohnke, Catherine Riseng, Liz Rother, Laura Rubine.
Also: Ginny Trocchio.

Next regular meeting: Wednesday, Aug. 10 at 4:30 p.m. in the second-floor council chambers at city hall, 301 E. Huron St., Ann Arbor. The commission will hold a joint working session with the park advisory commission on Tuesday, June 8. [confirm date]

The Chronicle survives in part through regular voluntary subscriptions to support our coverage of publicly-funded entities like the city's greenbelt program. If you're already supporting The Chronicle, please encourage your friends, neighbors and coworkers to do the same. Click this link for details: [Subscribe to The Chronicle](#).