

July 17, 2010

Greenbelt Bus Tour gives residents a glimpse of preserved land

By HEATHER LOCKWOOD

Christine LaBelle was one of more than 20 area residents who took the Greenbelt Bus Tour Saturday to learn more about the city of Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Program.

"I moved to Ann Arbor, like, 23 years ago from Flint, and I always thought it was wonderful that you could drive five minutes out of Ann Arbor and be in the country," said LaBelle, after taking a window seat on the bus. "And I didn't want to lose that."

The two hour-long tour was meant to showcase some of the open land that has been preserved by the taxpayer-funded program since its approval by voters in 2003.

Ann Arbor resident Nancy Kaplan and her husband Harvey Kaplan also took the tour. When asked why she came Kaplan said, "I wanted to see what we're buying (as taxpayers)."

She added, "I'm hoping to see how contiguous the land is, how it borders Ann Arbor. I'm hoping to see that it's all worth while."

Ginny Trocchio, project director for The Conservation Fund, said the program has preserved 1,782 acres of land to date, up from about 1,000 in 2009. And Trocchio



Ginny Trocchio, the project director of the Conservation Fund, stands outside of a tour bus to check in passengers for the Green Belt Bus Tour at the Kerrytown Farmers Market. PHOTO BY ANGELA J. CESERE

said plans to preserve an additional 1,300 acres are "in the works."

One of the four stops on the tour was at Bur Oaks Farm in Webster Township.

Tom Bloomer and his wife Rosanne Bloomer own and operate the farm, which produces food grade soybeans and popcorn. Bloomer said one reason the Greenbelt Program appealed to him was the security it offered.

"I've been an advocate of preserving land for a long time," he told the tour group. "The Greenbelt (Program) gives you the long-term security to run a business. We're willing to make the investment, to assume the risk ...

because of the stability of the land base. Agriculture thrives on stability."

Bloomer also stressed the importance of farms to the local economy, as they help diversify it.

"Working farms, like this one, are large contributors to the city of Ann Arbor," he said. "And virtually every square inch is in the Huron River Watershed—the more open space that's preserved, the better off you are down the road with the quality of your water."

Dan Ezekiel, vice chair of the Greenbelt Advisory Commission, talked about the program's uniqueness.

"It's the first program in the Midwest to use funds from a central city to preserve land outside of that city," Ezekiel said. "The fact that the city, (the townships and the county) can work together is really something."

Jennifer Hall, chair of the advisory commission, said the program's progress has exceeded her expectations thus far.

"When the voters passed the millage in 2003 and we started the program in 2004, there were a lot of development pressures," Hall said. "Now, the property values have really decreased, there isn't as much development pressure. We are well poised to do a lot more conservation work than we ever thought was possible."

Voters authorized a 0.5-mill tax for 30 years, officially called the Open Space and Parkland Preservation millage, which



Area residents stop at Botsford Recreational Preserve during a two hour-long bus tour Saturday to learn about the city of Ann Arbor's Greenbelt Program. PHOTO BY HEATHER LOCKWOOD

provides funds for parkland acquisition within the city and the preservation of open space, agricultural land and other natural habitats outside the city in a designated Greenbelt district. The Greenbelt millage wasn't a new tax when it was approved in 2003, however. The city had a land acquisition millage off and on dating back to the 1980s, and it was extended a couple years before it would have expired.

Hall said she thinks the city supported the program because "Ann Arbor voters saw that having sprawl outside outside of their city was a threat to their quality of life."

At the end of the tour LaBelle said she had gotten out of the experience what she hoped to.

"I really enjoyed the tour. I had been wanting to know more about the Greenbelt and see the (preserved) properties," she said.