

# Grassroots Victory Sets National Precedent

## Voters Overwhelmingly Choose Land Preservation Over Sprawl

By Ted Sylvester

On Nov. 4 voters in the City of Ann Arbor and Ann Arbor Township made their views loud and clear regarding open space and farmland preservation: They want more of it and they are willing to pay. By a 2 to 1 margin, voters in the city chose to tax themselves 0.5 mills for the next 30 years to buy land for parks and property development rights on 7,000 acres of open space near the city. By a 3 to 1 margin, township voters approved a 20-year, 0.7 mill tax to save about 2,000 acres of farmland in their community from future development and sprawl.

Ecology Center Director Mike Garfield co-directed

the Proposal B campaign in the City of Ann Arbor, and the Ecology Center helped build the broad coalition of environmental, business, and community groups that supported it.

Ann Arbor city and township residents joined voters in 62 other communities in 16 states around the nation to create approximately \$1.2 billion in new funds for land conservation. The local ballot measures were fairly typical in size and scope yet the passage of Ann Arbor's Proposal B, a greenbelt and open space millage, now stands out on the national stage as an unprecedented example of a grassroots open-space campaign defeating big-money opposition.

"I was shocked, quite frankly." That was how Will Abberger of the Trust for Public Land (TPL) described

his reaction to the passage of Ann Arbor's Parks and Greenbelt Open Space Program. "I can't remember anywhere where we have had a well-funded and well-organized opposition to a local open-space ballot measure and won."

Abberger is Associate Director of Conservation Finance for TPL, a 30-year-old national non-profit land conservation organization headquartered in San Francisco. He spoke with *FTGU* from TPL's Southeast Regional

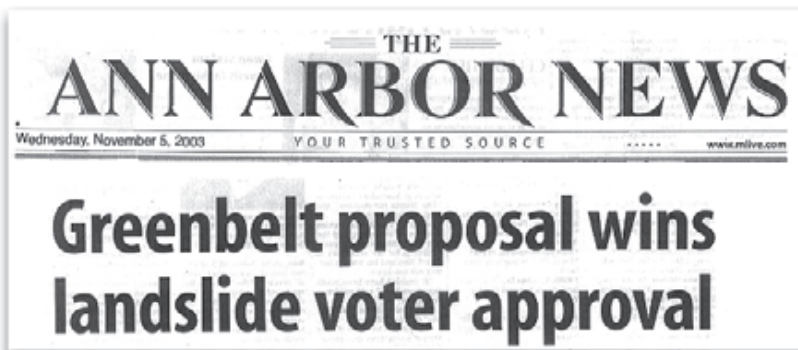
that spent a record \$329,410 in 1998 to defeat a countywide land preservation ballot proposal, and vowed to spend whatever it took to do the same in 2003.

Proponents of Proposal B, organized as Friends of Ann Arbor Open Space, conducted a well-financed (\$198,006) grassroots campaign that included support from hundreds of individuals, and loans and significant funds from the business and environmental communities. The campaign attracted donations from 535 individuals and businesses, setting a record for a City of Ann Arbor election.

"It's hard to say at this point what effect Ann Arbor's success might have on future land-use ballot campaigns

around the country," says Abberger. Though the success rate on local land use ballot proposals is higher than 80%, Abberger warns that land preservation and open space initiatives that involve taxes or tax increases can be easily defeated if a lot of work is not done to minimize the opposition. "We are hoping to learn from what was done in Ann Arbor," says Abberger.

"If people have even the slightest doubts about a tax proposal they inevitably vote 'No,'" says Garfield. "We had to persuade Ann Arbor voters that sprawl was not inevitable, and that there was a better way for the Ann Arbor area to grow." How was this campaign different than the losing effort of 1998? "Our post-election poll found that developers confused voters so badly in 1998 that one out of six



Office in Tallahassee, Florida. Among other land-preservation strategies, Abberger and TPL provide technical assistance to local ballot measure campaigns and track open space ballot measures across the country. Since 1996, TPL has worked with more than 250 local and state land preservation ballot proposals, including a \$5,000 donation to Ann Arbor's Proposal B campaign.

The well-funded and organized opposition Abberger is referring to in the case of Ann Arbor took the form of a \$222,622 campaign staged by Washtenaw Citizens for Responsible Growth, a group organized and bankrolled with \$100,000 from the Home Builders Association of Washtenaw County. This was the same front group for the Home Builders

voters didn't even realize that builders were lobbying against the plan," says Garfield. "This time, we exposed every hint of greenscam the developers threw at us, and made sure voters knew what the environmentalists and land preservationists thought about Proposal B."

The passage of Ann Arbor's Parks and Greenbelt Proposal and Ann Arbor Township's Land Preservation Program were both the products of years of planning and hard work by area land-use activists and organizations. The Ecology Center, for its part, helped build a coalition of groups to promote land preservation in Washtenaw County ten years ago. Five years ago, the Center worked to pass a countywide farmland and open space program that was victorious in the City of Ann Arbor and Ann Arbor Township but which was defeated countywide. Four years ago, the Center successfully campaigned to enact a citywide parks acquisition program, and in 2000 the Center led a triumphant campaign for a countywide natural areas preservation program.

The establishment of Ann Arbor Township's Land Preservation Program was also the result of years of dedicated efforts by grassroots activists, township residents, and government officials. The plan itself was the product of the Ann Arbor Township

Committee for Land Preservation, a small group of farmland owners, residents, and one government official, established in 2000 to study farming and farmland profitability. Four of seven committee members became active in the ballot campaign, including John Allison, a 17-year township resident who is serving in his seventh

hard-core volunteers as one reason for their success. But maybe as important, says Allison after years of personal interest and study of land-use issues in the township, is that farmland preservation is popular with township residents who want to fight sprawl and preserve the character of their community. "Open space and farmland

preservation is an issue people in our township are generally supportive of," says Allison.

Support for the development of the township's Purchase of Development Rights ordinance has been cultivated over a period of years as township land-use activists and interested citizens and government officials assembled in different venues – neighborhood meetings, conservation groups, study committees, workshops, and forums – and worked to formulate a sensible land-use program for the township. In 1998, the township voted in favor of an unsuccessful countywide farmland and open space plan and subsequent

surveys have shown support for farmland preservation was as high as 75%.

"The November vote," says Allison, "was the latest step in a series of actions taken by the township in the last six to seven years aimed at environmental protection and land preservation, including the passage of a master plan in 2001 and a purchase



*Celebrating election-day victories in the City of Ann Arbor and Ann Arbor Township: (top photo) Ann Arbor Mayor John Hiefije is flanked by Ann Arbor Township Trustees Della DiPietro and John Allison. (bottom photo) Ecology Center Director Mike Garfield raises a congratulatory toast.*

year on the township's Board of Trustees.

"We had no idea we would win by 77%," said Allison, referring to the huge margin of victory for the program by a record-setting voter turnout (45%) in an off-year election. Allison points to a "very, very active grassroots effort" and a lot of old-fashioned door-to-door campaigning by a group of

of development rights ordinance that spells out how land will be selected for preservation.”

Allison is quick to acknowledge that the success of the township’s ballot initiative “was helped out by the city campaign.” “It was important to know that we had more than our own resources to draw on,” explained Allison, citing collaboration with Ann Arbor Mayor John Hieftje, the Sierra Club, and the Ecology Center as being especially helpful. The city campaign also deflected some of the opposition to the township plan from the Home Builders Association. County campaign finance records show that Washtenaw Citizens for Responsible Growth spent money to oppose both the city and township proposals, but records do not indicate how much was spent in the city versus the township campaigns.

As treasurer for the township’s pro-millage campaign, Allison reports financial contributions from 119 different sources, mostly individuals, but including \$1,000 from the Ecology Center, for a record total of \$21,000.

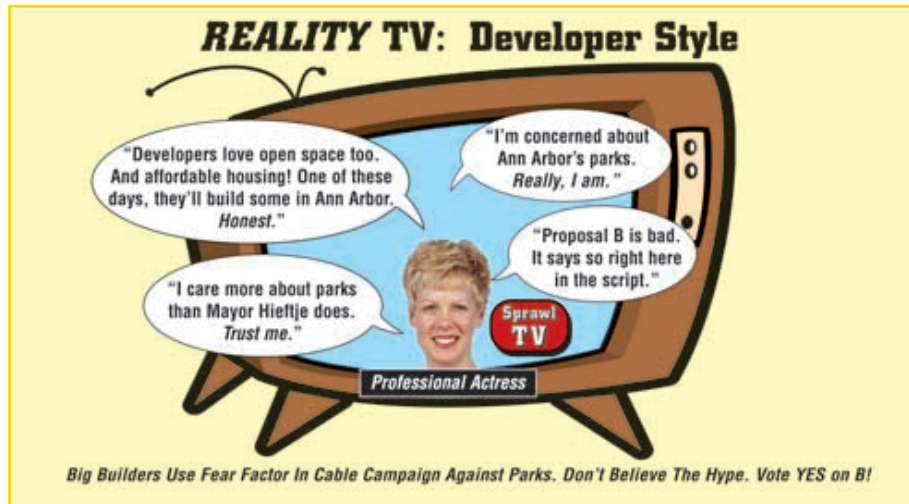
Yet, says Allison, voter turnout and the proposal’s margin of victory, “were beyond my wildest dreams.”

“Hopefully, this demonstration of support for farmland preservation by voters – despite strong opposition – will serve as a catalyst for similar programs in other townships.” Allison cited nearby Scio Township and Superior Township as places where

land-use planners and preservationists might find encouragement from the election results.

Jim Fuerstenau, Executive Director of the Michigan Farmland and

areas and open space. The City of Ann Arbor program makes its way into the state’s history books as well, as it creates the first regional fund of its kind in the state.



*A key pro-greenbelt strategy was exposing the developers’ greenscam tactics. This direct-mail brochure poked fun at the opponents’ TV ads.*

Community Alliance, a membership-based non-profit farmland conservation organization, believes the land preservation victories in Ann Arbor and Ann Arbor Township “will have a positive effect on future farm preservation campaigns in the state.” MFCA is working with farm activists in over a dozen counties, including Kent, Leelanau, Macomb, and Lapeer, to enact farm preservation programs. The successful ballot measures “show that people are willing to pay for farmland preservation,” says Fuerstenau, “and to have an urban/suburban group vote to do so is very significant.”

With the passage of the Land Preservation Program, Ann Arbor Township becomes only the second single township in the state of Michigan to create a local funding source specifically for farmland preservation, according to Fuerstenau (joining Peninsula Township in Grand Traverse County). Meridian Township in Ingham County also generates local funds to preserve land but their program protects primarily natural

Historically – on a local level, state level, even on a national level – the overwhelming victories for open space preservation in the Ann Arbor area will resonate with land-use planners of every ilk and stripe for years to come. The successful ballot measures will also affect a group of people who for years have endured the

hardships of their occupation and sometimes ill feelings from their city cousins: the farmers.

John Allison, who lives in a residential section of the township, makes this observation only after years of study and reflection on the subject. He has talked to many farmers over the years and hears stories about how people used to wave to the farmers as they were driving down the road on their tractors and combines. Now motorists often whiz by and make obscene gestures at them for moving so slowly.

“This should be a real boost for the farm community,” says Allison, “People really are willing to support them financially.” Perhaps, says Allison, we will some day “get back to the bond between townies and farmers” that was once shared not that long ago.

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Ted Sylvester is editor of *From the Ground Up*.