

Election 2003: Ann Arbor vs. Sprawl

Out-of-Town Developers Try to Buy Election; Grassroots Campaign Fights Back!

by Mike Garfield

"Rarely are people asked to consider an idea that so fundamentally improves the quality of life not only for themselves, but for future residents for the next 100 years. That is the scope of this bold initiative."

— David Canter, Site Director, Pfizer Ann Arbor Laboratories

"If approved, the Ann Arbor Parks and Greenbelt Proposal would be the single most significant land preservation measure approved by voters in Michigan history."

— William Hanson, Executive Director, Washtenaw Land Trust

In 1998, two of Ann Arbor's leading public figures, Lana Pollack and Keith Molin, led a campaign to preserve farmland and open space in Washtenaw County. Pollack is a Democrat, former State Senator, and President of the Michigan Environmental Council. Molin, a Republican, served as Commerce Secretary and Labor Secretary under Governor William Milliken. While the plan was backed by farmers, environmentalists, and community leaders, it was viciously attacked by the sprawl developer lobby, which spent more money fighting the proposal than any group had spent on any election in county history.

The plan lost at the ballot box, winning majorities in only two communities — the City of Ann Arbor and Ann Arbor Township. Since the election, sprawl developments have spread like a virus throughout Washtenaw and neighboring Livingston County, destroying thousands of acres of open space, worsening already-congested trafficways, and polluting the region's air and water.

But the earlier efforts may not have been in vain. This November, city and township voters will decide two bold and historic proposals to slow the destruction of the area's countryside. If voters can resist this year's PR/media blitz by the developer lobby, they'll prove that Michigan

communities can grow smart, and that Pollack and Molin were simply five years ahead of their time.

John Hieftje Breaks Down the Boundaries

In 1998, lifelong Ann Arbor resident John Hieftje was selling houses for a living, and spending his spare time on community projects and the land preservation ballot issue. The proposal's defeat left him wondering what could be put in place to deal with the area's unplanned and uncoordinated growth. "Ann Arbor residents clearly wanted to take the lead on this issue, but the county wasn't ready back then."

A year later, Hieftje was elected to his first public office, First Ward City Councilperson. By 2003, he was enjoying his second term as mayor, having won unprecedented landslide majorities both times, campaigning on a platform of "nature and neighborhoods."

While Hieftje is a born-and-bred Ann Arborite, he brought a regional approach to solving community problems, especially land use and environmental matters. In 2002, he helped initiate the first-ever regional planning discussions between Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and all of the surrounding townships. The discussions are ongoing, but the concept of intergovernmental collaboration took

an important new shape earlier this year.

In August, Hieftje announced a brilliant new plan to save the best remaining farmland and open space in Ann Arbor and its surrounding eight townships. Flanked by the community's top business and environmental leaders, he proposed converting and extending the city's popular parks acquisition fund into a "parks and greenbelt" program. Instead of limiting the fund to acquisition of recreational and natural area properties, the city would also provide seed money to buy development rights from farmers in the surrounding eight townships.

The "purchase of development rights" (PDR) mechanism offers many advantages over outright land purchase or drastic zoning revisions. In a PDR program, property remains in private ownership, so land stays on the tax rolls. If farmers want to stay in business, the program allows them to cash out some of the equity from their land. All PDR transactions are entirely voluntary, so no one's property rights are challenged. And finally, it's less expensive to buy development rights than to buy land outright, so taxpayer money stretches further. The PDR approach was the keystone of the 1998 proposal.

Under Hieftje's plan, the City of Ann Arbor would provide approxi-

mately one-third of the property value in any transaction. The city's money would have to be matched by township or county funds, state or federal monies, or by private donations. The program would provide a powerful incentive for Ann Arbor and its neighboring municipalities to sit down and decide where to guide the region's bustling growth, and where to protect agriculture and open space.

The plan quickly won broad and bipartisan community support. The area's Democratic leadership, from Hieftje to State Senator Liz Brater and U.S. Congressman John Dingell, threw its support behind the plan. But so did the community's top Republicans, from former Congressional candidate Joe Fitzsimmons to the county's Mr. Republican, Peter Fletcher, to Hieftje's most recent mayoral opponent, Marcia Higgins. Business executives endorsed the proposal for its quality-of-life impacts, believing that open space creates a good climate for attracting and retaining top employees. Early endorsers included the leaders of the city's largest private employer, largest real estate investment firm, and many smaller companies. The Ecology Center, Sierra Club, Washtenaw Land Trust, Huron River Watershed Council, and several other environmental groups threw their support behind the plan.

"Sprawl harms the business community as much as it does environmentalists," said Hieftje, "Republicans as much as Democrats, city folk as much as township residents. It is an issue that actually brings people together."

A Thoughtful Township Thinks Ahead

On the city's north and northeast outskirts, Ann Arbor Township officials have spent the last decade laying careful plans to retain the

Q & A: Ann Arbor Parks and Greenbelt Proposal

What will the program do?

The Ann Arbor Area Parks and Greenbelt program would preserve as much as 7,000 acres of the best open space in and around Ann Arbor. The program would generate \$35 million – plus \$30-\$50 million in matching funds from townships and other sources – to buy both parkland within the city and conservation easements on private lands outside the city borders.

How much will it cost?

Currently, Ann Arbor property owners pay a 0.5-mill parkland acquisition levy, which costs the average household approximately 90 cents per week. This tax would remain at the exact same level, extended for 30 years, with its purpose expanded to authorize the preservation of land in a greenbelt around the city.

What criteria will be used to select open space properties?

Top criteria include quality of agricultural land; proximity to city limits; characteristics of the property (species diversity, age of trees, presence of streams or wetlands etc.); size; proximity to other protected land; current or projected future use of adjacent property; and availability of matching funds.

How will the funds be allocated between city parks and greenbelt open space?

Approximately 1/3 would be spent inside the city, and 2/3 outside the city limits. Greenbelt funds would be prioritized for properties that offered a significant amount of matching funds: the city would pay only about one-third of the preservation cost, with the remainder coming from township, state, federal, and private sources.

Q & A: Ann Arbor Township PDR Program

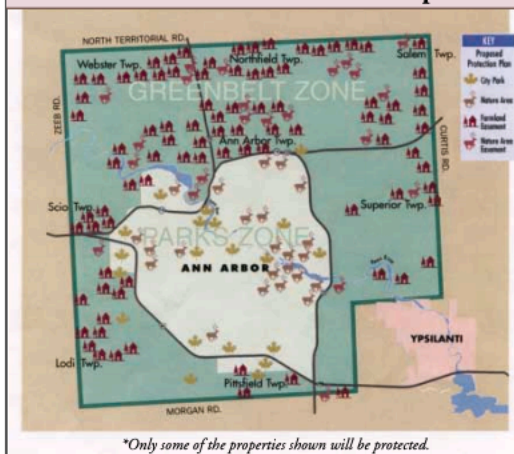
What would a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program do?

Ann Arbor Township would levy a 20-year 0.7-mill tax to fund the permanent preservation of farmland and open space in the township. The program would raise \$5.5 million plus \$15-20 million in matching funds, and save two-thirds of the township's farmland.

How does PDR work?

In a PDR program, participating landowners sell a conservation easement to the buyer which allows them to permanently protect their land and retain ownership of the property. The land stays on the tax rolls, and the landowner receives payment equal to the appraised value of the land as developable property less its value as farmland or open space.

Ann Arbor Parks and Greenbelt Map



township's rural character. When you drive from city to township, you don't need a sign to know where the one ends and the other begins. Several working farms dot the

countryside, development pressures in the township are relentless, threatening to convert hundreds and hundreds of acres of woods and farms into subdivisions.

In 1996, township voters elected a bipartisan slate of smart growth candidates to the Township Board of Trustees. Led by Supervisor Mike Moran, the Board took several proactive steps to protect the township's rural beauty, including improvements to their master plan, enactment of wetlands and natural features protection ordinances, and adoption of the county's first open space zoning ordinance, which encourages developers to cluster houses in a subdivision, and preserve common open space.

The Board also adopted several preemptive measures to stop unwanted development, and has consequently tangled with some of the area's developers and other powerful interests. After the township rejected development proposals of billionaire Tom Monaghan, the Domino's Pizza founder poured an unprecedented amount of money into a vicious campaign to oust the bipartisan slate in the 2000 election. Despite receiving over a dozen slick mailings on behalf of the incumbents' opponents, voters reelected Moran and company, sending a strong message to developers that Ann Arbor Township could not be bought.

Prior to the 2000 election, the trustees explored farmland preservation tools that could be applied in Ann Arbor Township. In 2001, they established a Farmland Preservation Committee, headed by Trustee John Allison. After conducting two years of research, the committee recommended that the township pass a PDR ordinance and create a township fund to help purchase agricultural development rights. In August, Moran unveiled a 0.7-mill property tax proposal to fund the township's PDR program. If both the township's PDR

Lies and the Lying Builders Who Tell Them

The sprawl developers have promised to spend whatever it takes to defeat the open space proposals, and they're already using the same tactics they used in 1998 to defeat that year's county land-preservation plan. They've hired Marketing Resource Group, consultants to the tobacco and waste industry lobbies, and have begun spreading disinformation and confusion. Here's what they're saying, followed by the facts:

What They Say: Thirty years is too long a time for a millage.

The Facts: Thirty years may not be long enough. When open space is lost, it's lost forever. Many publicly funded projects – including bridges, water systems, transit, buildings, and others – are paid off over 30 years or more. Open space can be preserved this way too, so that people who live then will help share the cost of saving land.

What They Say: The greenbelt just subsidizes the townships, which pay nothing.

The Facts: Ann Arbor would only pay only about one-third of the cost of preserving land in the townships, with the rest of the money coming from local, state, federal, and private sources.

What They Say: The program will make housing unaffordable in Ann Arbor.

The Facts: Housing is already expensive in the Ann Arbor area, but the cost of land is a minor factor in home prices. In fact, the home of one of the country's most successful open space preservation programs – Lancaster County, Pennsylvania – has the least expensive housing in the state.

What They Say: The program will just push sprawl further out from Ann Arbor.

The Facts: Sprawl has already spread far from Ann Arbor. The greenbelt will actually help guide development back inside Ann Arbor, where city officials are looking to encourage greater density, and to neighboring Ypsilanti, which is promoting redevelopment.



Photo: Jack Symbor

"Sprawl hurts the business community as much as it does environmentalists, Republicans as much as Democrats, city folk as much as township residents."
— Ann Arbor Mayor John Hieftje

program and the city's greenbelt proposal are approved by voters, the two funds could then leverage contributions from each other, as well as from other public and private donors.

Slamming Back Developer Greenscam

One obstacle stands between the city, the township, and a future without sprawl — the Home Builders Association (HBA) of Washtenaw County. Suburban sprawl developers control the HBA, and promised to spend as much as necessary to defeat the ballot proposals. The organization's public affairs director, Jeff Fisher, told *Crain's Detroit Business* that "we spent \$400,000 defeating this ballot proposal last time. We'll

spend another \$400,000 this time. We'll spend \$800,000." No election campaign has ever spent more in Washtenaw County history.

In 1998, the developer lobby created a phony green-sounding group ("Washtenaw Citizens for Responsible Growth"), play-acted concern about sprawl, recruited anti-tax farmers for their mouthpieces — claimed "There's a Better Way!" — and confused tens of thousands of voters with non-stop TV ads in the last two weeks that argued the county's farmland preservation plan was actually bad for farmers.

Post-election polls showed that voters didn't realize that the opponents were almost entirely funded by developers — and had they known that — the election would have turned out differently.

This year, all signs point to similar tactics. Washtenaw Citizens for Responsible Growth has been awakened from the dead. They've re-hired their 1998 consultants, Marketing Resource Group (MRG), the state's premier GOP and anti-environmental PR firm. According to their website, when they're not working for the sprawl developer lobby, MRG works for the state's largest polluters, the tobacco industry, and the waste industry. Early press statements and print ads show they're looking to again confuse voters, arguing that the anti-

sprawl plan will actually worsen sprawl.

But things may be different this time. Since 1998, City of Ann Arbor residents have voted 2-1 for a city parkland acquisition millage, and 3-1 for a county natural areas program. County farmers have grown more comfortable with PDR, and more Washtenaw County farmers applied to the state PDR program than farmers in any other Michigan county. Over the last five years, all local residents have seen traffic growing worse and nearby farmland disappear. Only last year, a developer proposed to build Michigan's largest-ever development just north of Ann Arbor, and hundreds of area residents have stormed their township hall in protest.

Everyone expects the same old tricks from the developer lobby. But the environmentalists, business leaders, Mayor Hieftje, and other leaders supporting the proposal think that Ann Arbor won't be fooled again. If we're right, 2003 will be the year Ann Arbor finally turns the tide on sprawl.

Mike Garfield is Director of the Ecology Center.

Help the Campaigns!

In the City of Ann Arbor, Ecology Center Director Mike Garfield is co-directing the campaign to pass the Parks & Greenbelt millage. To volunteer or get more information, please contact Barb Fuller at 734-213-2174 or a2openspace@provide.net.

Donations should be written to "Friends of Ann Arbor Open Space," and mailed to 1308 E. Stadium, Ann Arbor, MI 48104.

Ann Arbor Township activists would also welcome your support to win passage of the township PDR millage. Please contact Nancy Parachini at 734-302-5263 or parachin@umich.edu. Donations should be written to the "Ann Arbor Township Committee for Land Preservation," and mailed to 4215 Shetland Dr., Ann Arbor, MI 48105.