



People & Place

Fruit, Farms, and a Region's Future



The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy and its municipal partners are building the foundation for farmland protection along the US-31 corridor and the northernmost portion of the nationally recognized West Michigan fruit belt. The program has radically heightened the sense of how investment in working lands can have direct and demonstrable impacts on a region's agricultural economy and burgeoning local food systems.



People & Place

Land Conservancies as Community Builders

Place matters as Michigan rethinks its path to restoring prosperity in the 21st century. The way we value place depends very much on the diversity and beauty of the natural resources unique to Michigan. Every community has a story. The time has come for Michigan to recreate our state narrative to reflect the trust, optimism, and inspiration that is evident in land conservancies' work as innovators and advocates.

With generous support from the Consumers Energy Foundation, Heart of the Lakes launched an initiative to document how land conservancies and their partners are important to local economic development and thriving communities. Land protection projects from around the state, including this one, were selected as case studies to showcase land conservancies in their role as community builders.

Community building projects demonstrate the relevance of conservation to successful Michigan communities – helping to create attractive places to live, work, and play. Land conservancies that engage in this work find themselves more fully integrated in their community and able to deepen their connections and relationships. Through community building projects, conservation is strengthened as a shared value.

This approach becomes even more important in a rapidly changing world where protection of land simply for the sake of conservation may no longer resonate as strongly as it has in the past. Our everyday links to the land continually diminish. Community building projects are a way of tackling that problem at both ends. Meeting people where they are, instead of trying to convince them of some intrinsic values they may not share or understand, will create new opportunities to promote the importance of nature alongside economic development.

As nonprofit organizations dedicated to the permanent protection of land for the public good, Michigan's conservancies help create vibrant places through both land protection, as well as community engagement activities in support of local goals and objectives.

Heart of the Lakes is pleased to highlight a few exceptional projects with this case study and others, while recognizing the great work of the conservancies behind them. These projects exemplify a commitment to building communities and the value of people and place. Thank you to the Consumers Energy Foundation for making it possible to do so.

Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy

For two decades the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy (GTRLC) has protected and cared for the northwest Michigan's natural, scenic, farm and forest lands. The GTRLC thinks about the landscape in terms of watersheds, rivers, scenic transportation corridors and the vital clusters of the region's working farms and forests. By thinking about the community in this way, GTRLC is able to evaluate how certain land uses and protection and stewardship efforts in specific areas will impact the things our community members value the most – access to our region's majestic shorelines; opportunities for hiking, biking, hunting, canoeing, birding, fishing and other outdoor activities; safe, clean water; a sense of rural character; respect for private property rights; and a healthy economy.

GTRLC's mission is to protect significant natural, scenic, and farm lands, and advance stewardship, now and for future generations. Their service area includes Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Manistee Counties. With the support of individual donors and foundations, volunteers, and the partnership and leadership of local, state, and federal agencies, GTRLC has protected over 34,000 acres of land and more than 100 miles of shoreline along the region's exceptional rivers, lakes and streams. For more information, visit www.gtrlc.org



Acme Farmland

Acme Township, located in Grand Traverse County, is home to many farmers of fruit, vegetables and vinifera grapes. In 2005, the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy was asked to provide services to get the Acme Township Farmland Program up and running at a time when a millage passed in Acme Township. Acme's millage for farmland preservation was the only one that passed in a larger initiative of five townships in two counties. The Conservancy approached this opportunity and the millage dollars as a tremendous success on which to build the foundation for farmland protection along the rest of the US-31 Corridor and the northernmost portion of the nationally recognized and threatened West Michigan Fruitbelt.

Because the millage effort originally contemplated multiple townships, it was tied to a Grand Traverse County Farmland and Open Space

Preservation Ordinance. As a result, the Conservancy worked with Acme Township to get the first ever Grand Traverse County Farmland Board seated. Many residents assumed the county already had such an entity given a nearby township's long-standing and nationally recognized farmland preservation program in its jurisdiction. However, until the Acme Township program was established, the county was slow to take action and show its support for protecting its farmland resources.

Agricultural Accomplishments

The first step for the Township, Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, and their partners was establishing the “nuts and bolts” of the township program. This included a master plan farmland preservation component with a map of farmland eligible for protection, an application and scoring system suitable for both Acme Township and any other areas of the county should they choose to create a program, instituting an intergovernmental agreement between the township and the county, and getting the program “qualified” under the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development local farmland program standards.

Once this was done, the first round of applications was solicited, resulting in four farm families applying for over 815 acres of farmland. Under the program, there are only about 4,900 key acres of farmland targeted for preservation. Five agricultural conservation easements on 530 acres of farmland and critical natural lands in the Yuba Creek and Petobego Creek watersheds – both primary sub-watershed of Grand Traverse Bay – were purchased. The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy then worked with the township in securing over \$700,000 in Federal Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program matching funds and more than \$750,000 in landowner match through bargain sales.

In the second round of applications, an additional 1350 acres of farmland for protection was solicited, which demonstrated to taxpayers, funders and the region that landscape-scale conservation of this prized area of the Grand Traverse Bay region is in reach.



Increasing the Yield

Acme Township's successes have been highlighted and included as a key partner in the Food and Farming Network, northwest Michigan's 6-county effort (tied to the region's Grand Vision) with a goal of growing local food production and purchases to 20% of the local food system in alignment with the Michigan Good Food Charter, the Michigan Food Policy Council, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Michigan Agriculture Commission.

Philanthropic donor visits have been conducted, as well as public events, farm tours and processing facility tours that highlighted the direct connection between the purchase of farmland conservation easements and the economic benefits to the jobs and industry associated with the crops grown on those properties. These activities continue to be communicated to other growers and the public, further linking farm investment through purchased easements with the region's agricultural industry and growing local food movement.

Most recently, the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy received a powerful endorsement from Shoreline Fruit, a local fruit processor in northwest lower Michigan. Because Shoreline Fruit knows they can be assured of adequate, protected farmland for area fruit growers, they are willing to invest in expansion and new jobs. Shoreline Fruit became a champion and partner of the farmland protection effort, telling the land conservation story through their lens of jobs and economic development to new audiences throughout the region.





Heart of the Lakes

Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy was founded by Michigan's land conservancies to unite their individual efforts around a common goal – protecting Michigan's land. Heart of the Lakes supports land conservation by supporting conservation policy and practice, advocating sound public policies, and providing tools to strengthen conservancy effectiveness.

With Heart of the Lakes' support, our members are able to conserve Michigan's forests, farmland, coastline and other extraordinary places critical to Michigan's social, economic, and environmental well-being.



Heart of the Lakes

Center for Land Conservation Policy

www.heartofthelakes.org