



People & Place

Linking Land Conservation, Commerce and Local Communities



The Legacy Land Conservancy led the way when the Chelsea Area Chamber of Commerce sought partners to establish an economic development strategy linking the State of Michigan's Waterloo Recreation Area to the business community of Chelsea. That partnership grew to be The Big 400, whose allies pursue joint tourism and commerce strategies in the communities that share a common border with local and state public lands.



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 initial 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 are 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 getting us started.

Legacy Land Conservancy

Founded in 1971, Legacy Land Conservancy is Michigan's oldest organization dedicated to the voluntary conservation of locally important land. Faced with growing concerns about the potential for development of land along the Huron River, a group of Ann Arbor leaders banded together to acquire land along the river and keep it in public trust. From those humble beginnings, Legacy has grown to protecting nearly 6,000 acres—and more than 100 individual properties—of conserved lands that provide safe drinking water, places to play, and vibrant local farms in Washtenaw and Jackson Counties.

Legacy became one of the first accredited land trusts in Michigan and in the nation. This accreditation is a testament to over 40 years of voluntary conservation, supported by an extended community, and adhering to a set of standards designed to help guarantee that their conservation work will endure forever. For more information, visit www.legacylandconservancy.org

A Non-Traditional Partnership

The Big 400 took root with The Conservation Fund, a national organization, and their "Racing for Wildlife" partnership with NASCAR. The Conservation Fund approached the Chelsea Area Chamber of Commerce, and with the Legacy Land Conservancy's help, assembled a team to establish an economic development strategy that linked the Waterloo Recreation Area to the business community of Chelsea, Michigan. A working committee was formed that included representatives from 7 key stakeholder organizations:

Chelsea Area Chamber of Commerce, Chelsea Public Schools, City of Chelsea, Waterloo Recreation Area, Chelsea Center for the Arts, Legacy Land Conservancy, and The Conservation Fund.

A community training program developed by The Conservation Fund, "Balancing Nature and Commerce in Communities that Neighbor Public Lands" became the strategic road map for this endeavor. Once the Chelsea team completed the training, they understood the success of this project demanded expansion to other regional partners and organizations.

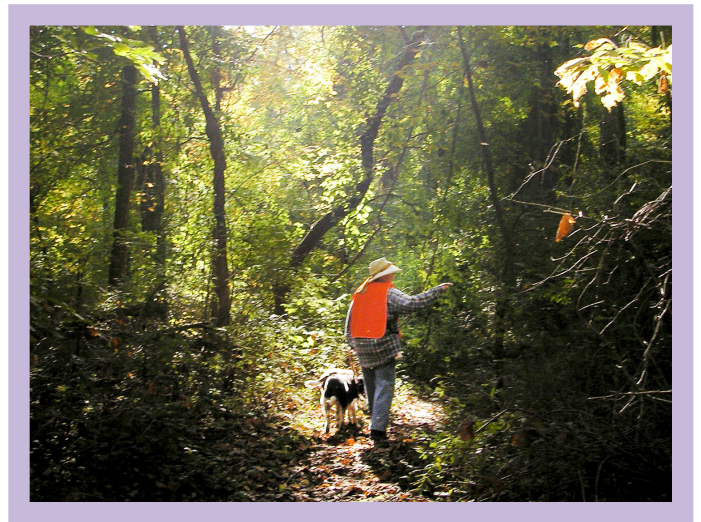


Neighboring communities of Dexter, Manchester, Stockbridge, Pinckney and East Jackson County were invited to join the team along with the Pinckney Recreation Area. Additionally, the Convention and Visitors Bureaus of Jackson County, Ann Arbor Area, and Ypsilanti joined the effort. The committee currently represents four counties, four municipalities, three Convention and Visitors Bureaus, five Chambers of Commerce, two State Recreation Areas, and land and nature conservancies. The 20 square miles of land included in The Big 400 stretches from Brooklyn and the Irish hills to Chelsea, Dexter, Manchester, Pinckney and Hell, Michigan. Uniting them all is a common mission of promoting Southeast Michigan communities, tourism and natural land preservation.

The Legacy Land Conservancy Connection

As a nonprofit dedicated to the permanent protection of important natural and working farm lands, Legacy Land Conservancy long recognized that the Waterloo and Pinckney State Recreation Areas were overlooked as an important economic resource. The organization's strategic plan notes that conservation is both an environmental issue and an economic driver, and that the underlying economics of the region are crucial if conservation is to be sustainable.

Hence, Legacy is a natural ally to The Big 400 and contributes in more ways than simply serving on its steering committee. Their priority areas for protection are throughout The Big 400 region, and Legacy works to protect lands that complement the ecological, scenic and recreational benefits of the two state recreation areas and other public lands. By doing so, Legacy helps ensure that the region remains attractive to tourists and residents alike while helping to grow community appreciation for the economic benefits of conservation lands.



The Big 400 At Work

Members of The Big 400, www.thebig400.com, collaborate to create opportunities to balance nature and protect community character, while increasing commerce and tourism by promoting "Small town living. Great big fun." Through this collaboration, non-traditional cross promotions have been developed to attract visitors and create grant opportunities for communities. The Big 400 links tourists to events and over 33,000 acres of outdoor fun anchored by the Waterloo and Pinkney Recreation areas, which together provide more Michigan state park land than anywhere else south of the Mackinac Bridge. Visited by over one million visitors each year. The Big 400 initiative is the first to connect these lands and their managers to an economic development effort.

These efforts have also cumulated in recent events such as the "Mill Lake Clean-up Project" through Michigan Cares for Tourism, the "Cranes, Colors and Cabernet" Festival at Sandhill Crane Vineyards, and The Big 400 Maple Festival, during which Big 400 communities teamed up to celebrate maple syruping in Michigan.

In 2014, The Big 400 received the Governor's Award for Innovative Tourism Collaboration in the category of Non-Traditional Partnerships. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources also bestowed a Partner in Conservation Award to the Mill Lake Cleanup Project, a partnership with Michigan Cares for Tourism and The Big 400.





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.



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Center for Land Conservation Policy

www.heartofthelakes.org