



People & Place

Partnering for Prosperity



The Land Conservancy of West Michigan and its many partners permanently protected a 173-acre dune and wetland ecosystem at the mouth of the Kalamazoo River. Now owned by the City of Saugatuck as a public natural area, this project is an example of the various partnership roles a conservancy can undertake in the course of a multi-year community project, including: lead for fundraising, negotiator and coordinator, political advisor, temporary owner and property manager.



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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.

The Land Conservancy of West Michigan

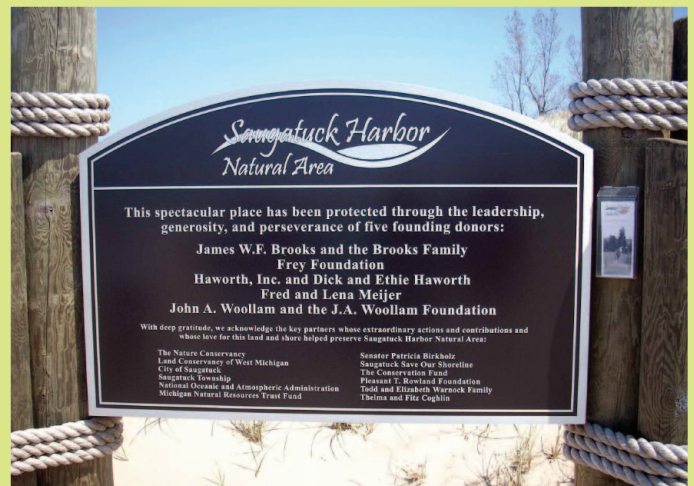
As a non-profit land conservancy, the Land Conservancy of West Michigan (LCWM) works with private landowners and governmental bodies to permanently protect and care for the land. To date, LCWM has permanently preserved 100 properties and more than 8,000 acres of land. This protected land reflects the diversity and beauty of West Michigan and includes lush forests, grassy fields, flowering meadows, marshy wetlands and rolling sand dunes. These significant habitats and ecosystems are home to a rich variety of plants and wildlife, some of which are now threatened or endangered species.

The conservancy is the only organization in their service area dedicated solely to the permanent conservation of significant natural areas. Their land protection area includes all or parts of eight counties: Allegan, Kent, Ottawa, Newaygo, Muskegon, Oceana, Mason and Lake. Formerly the Natural Areas Conservancy of West Michigan, the organization was founded in 1976 by a dedicated group of volunteers who sought to protect West Michigan's natural landscape. For more information, visit www.naturenearby.org

Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area

Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area (SHNA) was established in December 2011 after more than two decades of work by the local community and conservation groups to ensure that this magnificent 173-acre dune and wetland ecosystem at the mouth of the Kalamazoo River was not forever altered by beachfront development. Now owned by the City of Saugatuck as a public natural area adjacent to its Oval Beach City Park, the combined beach of Oval Park and SHNA is frequently cited as one of the best public beaches in the Midwest, which includes a mile-long expanse of undeveloped shoreline and dunes.

The SHNA property preserves natural shoreline habitats for more than seven rare plant and animal species. What is more important for the local community, though, is that it preserves an iconic shoreline



landscape that hasn't changed since the first drawings and maps were made of the area in the late 1800s. It is a signature property that exemplifies why the region was used by Native Americans, settled by Europeans, used for shipping and fishing, and now for tourism and recreation.

The site also has historical significance as the site of the original mouth of the Kalamazoo River. Old pilings from the original river opening still extend out into Lake Michigan. A fishing settlement known as Fishtown was located on the north side of what is now the Oxbow Lagoon. The site was abandoned when the original mouth drifted closed soon after the opening of the present channel. There was also a lighthouse where the old Kalamazoo River channel entered Lake Michigan. The original structure was destroyed by a tornado. The replacement structure is a private home on private land.

Success in Numbers

This almost \$25 million project would not have been successful without the partnership of the community (both year-round and seasonal residents), regional financial and community leaders, two land conservancies (The Land Conservancy of West Michigan and The Nature Conservancy), regional foundations, local groups such as the historic society and local environmental groups, and the support of political representatives.

At the hub of this broader partnership is the relationship between a community of about 10,000 and a small land conservancy (the Land Conservancy's membership is about 2,011) that held the effort together. The Land Conservancy of West Michigan coordinated the work of all the partners, took the lead on securing grants for the City, conducted a community fund-raising campaign, and took on the risk of owning the property for two years until grants enabled the City's purchase from the Conservancy.



The exceptional natural features of the property, including rare and endangered species, put this project at the top of the list for protection for decades for the Land Conservancy of West Michigan. But the community and regional connections to this particular piece of land are perhaps the real reason why its permanent protection was even possible. Understanding and leveraging those connections became the work of the conservancy and its partners to see the deal through.

The goal of protecting critical natural features on this land was always kept front and center, but it was vital to communicate other important community values, such as tourism, historic protection, community character, and healthy recreational space, in order to attract supporters and secure the significant funding needed to complete the project.

In for the Long Haul

The Land Conservancy's relationship with the City of Saugatuck is now transforming into a partnership for long-term stewardship, outreach and education that is already causing the community to look at all the natural area parks it owns in a different way. It also spawned the creation of a volunteer docent program and is increasingly being promoted as a key feature of the town for tourism and conventions.

The City has reported a definite increase in the number of visitors to Oval Beach Park since the Natural Area was added to the park and after receiving media attention. The docents have more participants in their weekly walk program, too, signaling a definite revitalization to this area.





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