



Farm Preservation

SAYLER ORCHARDS

PLACES CREATE STORIES

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OF
THE
LAKES

FIVE GENERATIONS ON THE LAND

As Rick Saylor's great grandfather Sam set about farming in the wilds of Yuba, Michigan in the 1850s, he also set about building a community. "It needed to be palatable so he built churches, donated land on Grand Traverse Bay as a park, among other efforts," according to Rick, "His wife needed to like the place!"

The Saylor farm had a considerable amount of acreage to start, but fragmentation occurred when the land was divided as it was passed down to heirs.

As the fifth generation on the remaining 180 acres, Rick has been on the farm all his life, joined by wife Donna and his children.

Deep roots in the region, a family tradition of giving back to the community, and the concern of further fragmentation of his family's land triggered Rick's thoughts about preserving the farm. And at the time his father neared retirement, other reasons became apparent such as escalating land costs and the overall loss of land in farms in the region.

"Fruit farming is different," Rick explains. "The entire investment is in the land—trees, everything is tied to the land."

And excellent fruit sites are not found just anywhere. "Cherry sites are always on high hills adjacent to water, exactly where people want to build homes. Because of the costs and demand for land to build houses, it is pretty hard to buy a farm to become a cherry farmer if you're not a commercial operator already."

In order to farm, Rick also notes, farms have to be viable enterprises so that farm services stay in the area.

FARM FACTS

PROPRIETORS

Rick and Donna Saylor

YEARS FARMING

Lifelong

FARM SIZE

180 acres (140 acres farmed/permanently protected)

LOCATION

Acme Township, Grand Traverse County

FRUIT

Sweet and tart cherries and pears

FARMLAND PROTECTED

Conservation easement placed on 140 acres of the property, development rights purchased below market value (thanks to a bargain sale from the Saylor family) with funding from Acme Township millage and state/federal funds.





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When the American Farmland Trust came to the region in 2000, Rick and his family stood ready to support efforts to establish local purchase of development rights programs to protect blocks of farmland.

Ultimately Acme Township adopted an ordinance and the voters approved a 10-year, 1 mill levy to fund a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program in 2004. (The Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy administers the program under contract and works to provide matching dollars for Township funds for all its PDR deals.)

Although the Saylers were one of the initial applicants to Acme's Township's program, 10 years of challenges stood in the way. Sadly, when Rick's father died in 2001, an estate tax liability on the property resulted in a federal lien on the property. The farm also had gas leases and gas wells on the property, which also had to be cleared before the PDR deal could be finalized.

Rick and Donna persisted and stood by their conviction that permanently protecting the farm by selling the development rights was still the right tool for their family, the farm and their community. Finally, in 2014, the Saylers completed the transaction and a permanent conservation easement now

ensures 140 acres of their most viable farmland will be farmland forever.

With the proceeds from the sale, the Saylers reinvested in the farm by undertaking intense tree planting, necessary for tree rotation but deferred during the 10 years paying off the tax lien. They also established a retirement fund and put some money in the bank.

"I don't know if my future heirs, my grandkids, will want to farm. I don't control that. But I want to give them an opportunity and I wanted to avoid the pitfalls of generational shifts, I don't want it to be such a struggle,"

Rick says, "This farm has supported five generations, but once it is sold, it is gone forever. Studies have shown that once you sell the land, the money is gone in one generation."

Importantly, Rick believes their decision supports the community, clearly a family tradition traceable to great grandfather Sam. "Our decision wasn't about us, it was about everything other than us and what we can do for the

community. I'd like to see a solid block of farmland preserved, keep the farms viable and then keep all the businesses associated with farming—keep them right here," he says. "All four of the original applicants put money back into the farm and all are flourishing."

He points to other community benefits such as making farmland more affordable to beginning farmers, especially for cherry growers. Township taxpayers will not be on the hook to maintain required infrastructure and other municipal services had the property been developed for residential homes. Open space and view sheds are other benefits of protected farmland.

Clearly Acme Township residents agree, as does the farm community.

In 2014, voters renewed the PDR program millage for another ten years. Although it was a struggle to get farmers to apply in 2004, nearly all of the farms in the township now have letters of application to the program.

