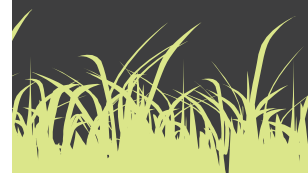


Land Conservancies As Community Builders

A Practitioner's Guide

HEART
OF
THE
LAKES



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 are evident in our collective work as innovators and advocates.

In 2012, Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy (Heart of the Lakes) launched a program to demonstrate how land conservancies and their partners are important to local economic development strategies. The project has two goals: The first is to identify, document and showcase a few dynamic land protection projects to build the visibility of land conservancies in their role as community builders. The second is to better equip those working in land protection with lessons learned from these case studies, as well as other protection projects, to encourage more community building projects around the state.

What is a Community Building Project?

Community building projects generally have these two hallmarks:

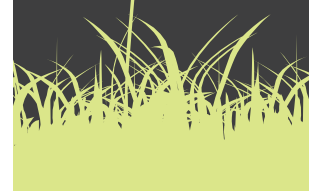
- Active engagement of community partners who recognize and support the project because of the potential for economic development, placemaking or the project has a connection to a highly visible community initiative. *By definition, community building means the presence of active partners and almost always a public partner, such as a local community, park department, or state agency.*
- Land protection that targets a community asset, sometimes a much-loved place of the heart for many in the community, and provides often difficult to quantify community benefits beyond the immediate protection of the natural features of that land. These benefits vary widely but some examples might include lands that:
 - Add to the attractiveness of a community's gateway
 - Significantly contribute to a community's position as a tourist destination
 - Advance a regional or even state priority such as a connected network of park lands and trails
 - Support regional agriculture or forestry
 - Provide access to widely appreciated places of natural beauty or scenic vistas.

Community building projects provide widely appreciated or recognized benefits beyond the immediate borders of the protected land. It represents much more than the sum of its parts.

In some cases, protected land may not immediately be recognized as a community builder. But it can grow to become one depending on how it is used and shared with the community. In fact, many nature preserves held by land conservancies have become just that—a widely valued space for quiet recreation, structured educational or outdoor activities, or even annual community events.

Examples help define and the five projects selected as Heart of the Lakes case studies are among the best. The brief descriptions that follow do not tell the full story; readers are referred to the Case Study documents that have been developed as part of the Land Conservancies as Community Builders project.





Acme Farmland Program (Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy)

Builds 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 the region's agricultural economy and local food systems.



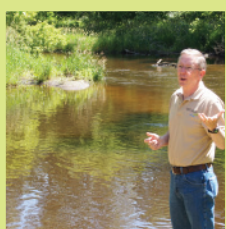
Arcadia Area & Explore the Shores (Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy)

Two of the conservancy's protected nature preserves are part of a collaborative network of publically accessible and jointly marketed sites designed to provide barrier-free accessibility, educational opportunities and a connection to recreation and fishing in Manistee County. The Explore the Shores collaborative is committed to enhancing economic health by drawing 1 million new visitors to its sites by the year 2020.



Pilgrim Haven (Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy)

A bequest to SWMLC ensured permanent conservation of a beloved community asset and former summer camp. SWMLC turned to the community to develop a master plan that ties into area municipal plans and, with their public partners, leverage Pilgrim Haven's resources to accomplish multiple regional objectives, including a destination point for proposed regional bike and pedestrian trail connections.



Pine River Universal Access Collaboration (Chippewa Watershed Conservancy)

CWC is collaborating with partners to install a rustic canoe/kayak access point on one of their preserves and transferring 1.2 acres of their lands to Gratiot County Parks and Recreation for development of a universally accessible parking area launch facility—all in support of a 35-mile river trail.



Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area (Land Conservancy of West Michigan)

LCWM and its community partners permanently protected 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, the project is an extraordinary example of the various partnership roles a conservancy can undertake in the course of a multi-year community project, including the lead for fundraising campaigns; negotiator and coordinator between partners, landowners, municipalities and community members; political advisor; temporary owner; and property management planner.

Needless to say, community building projects come in all shapes and sizes and defining them can be somewhat subjective. Because of their intrinsic or potential value to the community, even a small land protection project might have a significant impact. And in some cases, the land in question may not start out as a community builder, but becomes one because it is purposely used to connect with community.



Tips for Building Community

Why Do Them?

Community building projects can demonstrate the relevance of the land conservancy to a much broader segment of the community, boosting the identity and visibility of that organization as a vital and trusted institution worthy of support. Rather than working in isolation, conservancies that engage in this work find themselves more fully integrated in their community and are able to deepen their connections and relationships with it. The result is an organization with greater resiliency and higher standing, more reflective of the community it is a part of, and able to attract both the people and resources needed to support its work, including the promise to protect land in perpetuity. *Through community building projects, the conservancy becomes a valued community asset.*

The community approach becomes even more important in a rapidly changing world where protection of natural lands simply for the sake of natural lands may no longer resonate as strongly as it has in the past. Our everyday links to lands and the natural processes that support ecological systems, productive agriculture, and healthy forests continually diminish. Community building projects are a way of tackling that problem at both ends. Meeting people where they are by linking projects to their values and interests, instead of trying to convince them of some intrinsic values they may not share or understand, will create new opportunities to also promote the importance of nature and natural systems. Strengthening that connection to nature with a growing population that spends more time in front of electronic screens than walking a nature trail will in turn generate new champions who more fully appreciate the need to protect nature for nature's sake.

Building community through land conservation does not mean abandoning a mission of protecting important natural, farm or forest lands. Nor does it mean only doing community type projects. But it may be worthwhile to take a second look at projects with potential community building benefits that might have been otherwise dismissed because of lack of strict alignment with the traditional criteria of the conservancy or land protection organization. It may mean reframing a project currently underway as a community builder to open up opportunities for new partners, allies and supporters.

Several themes or elements are common to most community building projects, and that is certainly true of the five case studies. From these are a few tips worth sharing in this Guide and are general enough to be applicable to almost any stage of a land protection project.

Tip: On Being a Community Asset

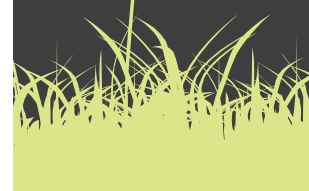
Simply put, being a community asset means not operating in a vacuum. Most nonprofit land protection organizations have some level of community engagement as they must rely on a good reputation and goodwill of supporters to pursue a supportable mission, elements that cannot exist in a vacuum. But to be recognized as a community institution, one the community would rather not be without (think symphony, ballet, museum, or theatre), takes a higher level of presence and engagement—front and center on the community stage. There are common traits among those land conservation groups that enjoy a very visible presence in the community(ies) they serve, including:

- Vision and Leadership
- Valued Partner
- Problem Solver
- Connector—connecting the dots between the organization's mission and community values
- Facilitator/Convener/Driver
- Communicator
- Resource Leverager—leading fundraising and/or aligning funding or other needed resources
- Nimble—quick to step up
- Visibly Present—around for the long haul

In total, these are the qualities that make a land conservation organization a valued partner. It does take capacity and resources to be one, but arguably, it is from community building land protection work that can grow an organization's capacity.

Tipster:

There are many, many exceptional community building projects completed or in progress around the state, the result of some extraordinary collaborations, many of them led by Michigan's land conservancies. Heart of the Lakes is committed to not only supporting those efforts with tools like this guide, but to putting a much deserved spotlight on those land protection projects that build community and make place matter.



Tip: Find the Right Role

By definition, community building projects require partners, and there are many possible roles a land protection group can play—from primary project driver to a support position as fundraisers or technical advisors. Possible roles include:

- Project leader
- Transaction experts, including land negotiations
- Planning and design experts
- Conveners of partners and stakeholders
- Fundraiser/Grant writers
- Community cheerleaders
- Stewards/land managers
- Political advisors and strategists
- Community leader and decision-maker
- Balancer—natural resource protection, restoration, and public access
- All of the above—and more

Much consideration may need to go into determining an organization's right role, based on organizational interests, internal leadership, time, capacity, resources, mission, and a host of other factors. However, a new opportunity can emerge with very little warning and little time to waste before needing to act. No matter the situation, be clear and thoughtful about potential roles—a commitment is made in becoming a community partner, and nothing could be worse than abandoning that post because the work cannot be sustained, be it lack of resources or lack of internal will. No matter what role, organizational leadership must be in agreement in order to sustain participation over time. Because property transactions can sometimes take years and extend beyond the terms of volunteer leadership, it is important to regularly revisit community commitment with the board, key staff and volunteers of the organization, as well as other partners such as funders and community leaders.

Tipster: Pine River Universal Access Collaboration (Chippewa Watershed Conservancy)

As part of the Friends of the Pine River, CWC's contribution to this community endeavor is making land available to site both rustic and universally accessible canoe/kayak boat launches on the river. CWC will also be assisting with needed fundraising for the project. Their mission to protect natural habitat and open space is enhanced by the distinct and essential role they play in the collaboration—providing the lands needed for the launches required of a successful river trail, thereby helping people understand and appreciate the river by providing recreational access to it.

Tip: Frame Messages that Underscore Community

Simply put, frame messages so that they are “community” framed or align messages about protection projects that link community values and interests. Organizations can position themselves as meeting the needs of the community, even with simple messages such as, “Through our land protection work, we are contributing to a vibrant community with beautiful views and a healthy environment.” By explaining how a project(s) aligns and supports community benefits, new or alternative venues for communicating an organization's story and great works will become apparent, such as links to others' websites and social media posts. Even traditional media will be more apt to pay attention. *Others will want to tell the story of the project and the organization behind it—expanding outreach to new and diverse audiences.*

Tipster: Acme Farmland Protection (Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy)

The Conservancy received a very powerful endorsement from Shoreland Fruit, a local fruit processor in northwest lower Michigan. Because they know they can be assured of adequate, protected farmland for area fruit growers, Shoreland Fruit can invest in expansion and new jobs. Shoreland 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.



Tips for Building Community

Tip: Engage the Right Partners

As important as the role of the conservation organization are the partners on the project. Choosing the right partners can make an enormous difference to the project success. Think about what needs to happen to meet project goals and the ideal partners who may be positioned to help. Partners may be needed to:

- Complete the transaction
- Ultimately hold the land—very often, it may not be the nonprofit land protection group that holds the fee, but the community itself, even though the nonprofit was a significant player in securing its protection.
- Engage community—who or what groups are potential stakeholders that might share an important connection?
- Elevate the project as important to community building—are there local leaders who can be project champions? Business or Chamber of Commerce? Local officials? Their support, even if in name alone, is an endorsement that can resonate strongly throughout the community
- Secure funding or other needed support—This may include leading philanthropists in the community or it may mean those who can reach those philanthropists. It may include politicians or other people of influence.

Partnerships can be informal or formal, ad hoc or even permanent if the result is joint management of the property into the future. All of the case studies selected for Heart of the Lakes' *Land Conservancies as Community Builders* are good resources to explore the diversity of partnerships, collaboration and their structure.

Tipster: Explore the Shores and Arcadia Area (Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy)

The Explore the Shores network of barrier-free sites that provide access to water in Manistee County are the result of a dynamic partnership led by the Alliance for Economic Success, a regional economic development organization, with a wide variety of public and private partners, including the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy.

Tip: Align Mission-Based Projects with Community Values and Interests

This does not mean realigning an organizational mission to fit a project, it means asking the question: are there land protection projects that meet the mission and are of special interest to the community as well?

Tipster: Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area (Land Conservancy of West Michigan)

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 never dropped by the conservancy, but they wisely recognized that extolling those virtues alone would not necessarily guarantee the amassment of resources needed to complete the deal. They, instead, became quite versant in communicating other important community values such as tourism, historic protection, community character, and healthy recreational space.

Tip: Get Out on the Land

Words can paint a picture and a picture may be worth a thousand words, but nothing connects people to land than the opportunity to get on it. Consequently, some of the most common tactics for engaging community include hikes, tours or other events that bring people to the land. More and more, special events such as workshops for photography, plein air art contests, birding, bird and bat houses, habitat improvement (stewardship work days to remove invasive species), put protected land at center stage. Groups that reach beyond their own membership have found ways to identify new prospects as well as create a heightened community awareness of their mission and work.

Tipster: Pilgrim Haven Natural Area (Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy)

The Conservancy not only invited the community to visit Pilgrim Haven, once a beloved summer camp, they invited them to create a vision for it. An early public visioning session provided a baseline of ideas, which was followed by a community design charrette, attended by over 200 neighbors, area residents, former campers, conservationists, and their own members, to help determine the property's future use, design and management. The result is a vision embraced by the community, and the investment made in its creation, means there will be life-long champions for this special place.



Tip: Project Funding (An Aside)

Just as public partners are common to community building projects, so are public funds. When it comes to land protection, there are a few key sources of funding. One of the most important—and common to almost all of the Heart of the Lakes' case studies—is the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (Trust Fund). Revenues from state-owned minerals established the \$500 million Trust Fund, and funding is available for land acquisition for local communities or the State of Michigan for environmental and recreational purposes, but not to nonprofit conservation organizations. Nonetheless, some of the most successful community building land protection projects engage nonprofit partners, including land conservancies, to help secure project funds from that source. That help typically comes in the form of grant proposal writing, technical assistance to communities, and fundraising for required match dollars.

This tip stresses the importance of the Trust Fund (indeed, all public funding sources) and the need to continually advocate for its conservation purposes. Even if an organization is not now or does not plan to be engaged in projects that require Trust Fund dollars, support of it is still absolutely vital. To make great places and great communities, there is always a need to guard and grow the dedicated funding sources that make them possible. Watch for opportunities to get engaged through Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy.

Tipster: Headlands Dark Sky Park (Little Traverse Conservancy)

The vision and cooperation of many organizations and governmental units made the Headlands International Dark Sky Park in Emmet County a reality, only the sixth such park in the United States and the ninth in the world at the time it was awarded designation in 2011. Now a signature destination for sky watchers from all over the country, it was a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund project from the start. The Village of Mackinaw City submitted the application, and later conveyed it to Emmet County. Little Traverse Conservancy raised the 25% local share—a great success story for the Trust Fund and for the power of collaborations.

Tip: Getting and Giving Credit

Partnerships can be tricky to navigate and nothing makes good community work go sour faster than one party claiming credit over another. Put the project first, strive early on to determine how respective partners should talk about their project in external communications (even to go so far as to include communications in a formal partnership agreement if one exists) and take extra steps to acknowledge everyone's good work. There is a legitimate fear that one's own organizational efforts will be lost or diminished, and therefore the investment of time and resources will not reap the benefits of heightened visibility, recognition and support. But there are ways to address this, including the following tips:

- If capacity and skills exist, be the lead partner on project communications. You'll be in a better position to make sure there is adequate recognition and you can "house" marketing pieces such as website pages, brochures and fliers, email and other communications
- Agree with partners to put a special look or brand on a project that is organizational neutral but supports all partners, such as a special project logo to go on letterhead and other communication pieces. List all key partners whenever possible on communication pieces
- Be present for all the major milestones and beyond—organize the project kickoff, lead events on site, keep the project front and center in your own communications if it is a major priority, speak at the dedication, keep retelling the story of the organization's involvement
- Agree to agree how to talk about the work and those involved, as in the partnership agreement mentioned above
- Take credit when it is warranted but also extend it where it is due. Keep the future in mind as one project can lead to others. Work to maintain integrity and respect among partners and the benefits will flow back to the conservation group, largely in the form of new community building opportunities where it can continue to demonstrate its value as a much appreciated community asset.
- Be visible as a champion for the community project, if not the champion, through communications and media. In the short term, there may not be specific quantitative returns of additional dollars or donors for the organization generally. Instead, consider it one important way to build community visibility, leading to greater support over time.



Heart of the Lakes
Center for Land Conservation Policy
www.heartofthelakes.org