

Playing to Win

Lessons from Washtenaw County's Successful Land Preservation Ballot Campaigns



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Washtenaw County Michigan



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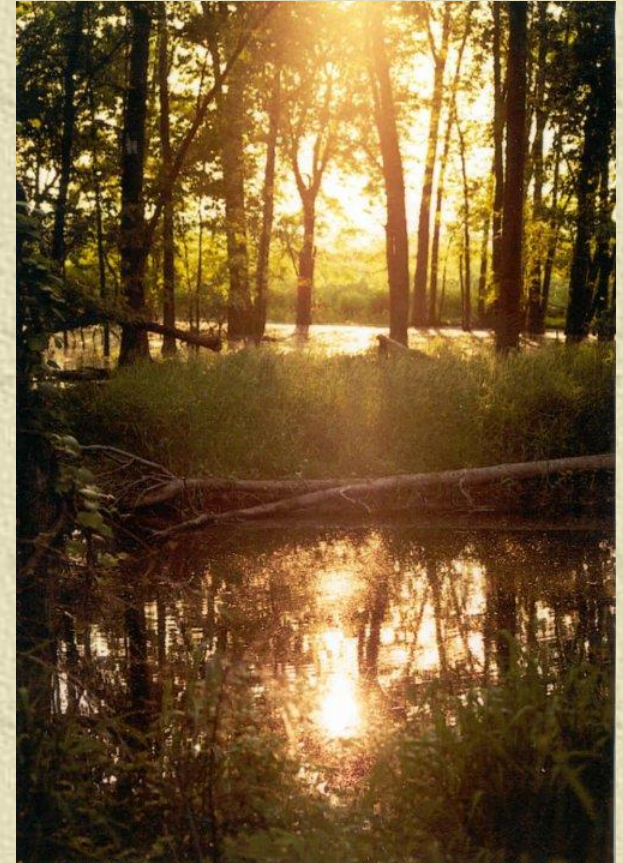
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Emerging Concern Over Land Use

- ✧ 1982: first County farmland preservation report
- ✧ Little/no state funding for PACE
- ✧ 1996: Environmentalists and farmers unite for farmland preservation, pitch millage for PACE
- ✧ County task force established, report with recs for millages
- ✧ 1998: County Board overwhelmingly approves ballot language



1998 Ballot Proposal 1

- ✦ Countywide proposal
- ✦ 10-Year, 0.4 Mills, \$40 Million
 - ✦ Farmland Preservation (PACE)
 - ✦ Natural Area Acquisition
 - ✦ Brownfield Redevelopment
 - ✦ Planning Assistance for Rural Townships
- ✦ August poll: 50% yes, 20% likely favor



Campaign Loses

- ✦ Ran “safe” campaign, raised \$220,000
- ✦ Homebuilders spent \$330,000 to defeat proposal
- ✦ PACE was target as new concept
- ✦ Grassroots v. mass market, direct mail v. TV/radio, “Preserve our Heritage” v. “A Better Way”
- ✦ Lost 58%-42%
- ✦ Post-election poll said many voters did not know who funded opposition
- ✦ Won only in Ann Arbor and AA Township



Lessons Learned

- ✦ Greenwash must be exposed
- ✦ TV can decide elections (farmer spot)
- ✦ Timing critical (Fieger, assisted suicide)
- ✦ New tax proposals very hard to win against funded opposition
- ✦ Fundraising critical



What Now?

- ✦ Environmentalists run petition drive to renew Ann Arbor park acquisition millage (1999)
- ✦ No organized opposition -- wins 65%-35%
- ✦ Environmentalists organize broad coalition to support \$30M plan to buy Washtenaw County natural areas (2000)
- ✦ Wins 64%-36%



Reasonable and Meaningful Level of Funding

- ✦ 10-Year 0.25-Mill Levy
- ✦ Cost Less Than \$20 per Year for Average County Household
- ✦ Leverage Matching Funds
- ✦ Enable the Purchase of Environmentally Significant Land



2000 Campaign Message - Quality of Life

- ✦ Land preservation is about quality of life
- ✦ Boosts economic development
- ✦ May decrease long-term tax burden
- ✦ Redirects development back to urban areas
- ✦ Controls further traffic congestion
- ✦ Air and water quality benefits
- ✦ Won development community support. Use of language - “natural areas,” not “open space”



Land Preservation May Decrease Long-Term Tax Burden

✧ Costs of sprawl outrun tax revenues

- Scio Township Cost of Community Services study (University of Michigan, 1998)
- Ann Arbor Township Community Cost Comparison (Washtenaw Land Trust, 1999)
- Washtenaw County Total Tax Commitment study (Washtenaw Land Trust 2002, unpublished)

✧ “Cows don’t go to school”

✧ “Cornfields don’t call 911”



2003 Greenbelt Proposal

- ✧ City of Ann Arbor proposal extends 1999 parks millage (0.5-mill) for 30 years
- ✧ Purpose of millage expanded to allow funds to be spent in Greenbelt region
- ✧ Millage to generate \$84M, with 2/3 for Greenbelt
- ✧ Ann Arbor Township (0.7-mill, 20 years) proposal would generate \$7M for PACE



Rapid-Fire Campaign

- ✦ Both proposals approved for ballots in August
- ✦ Campaign committee and fundraising committee organized quickly
- ✦ Hired professional outfit for TV/radio
- ✦ Homebuilders caught by surprise—and had been infiltrated
- ✦ Realtors neutralized
- ✦ No attack went unanswered

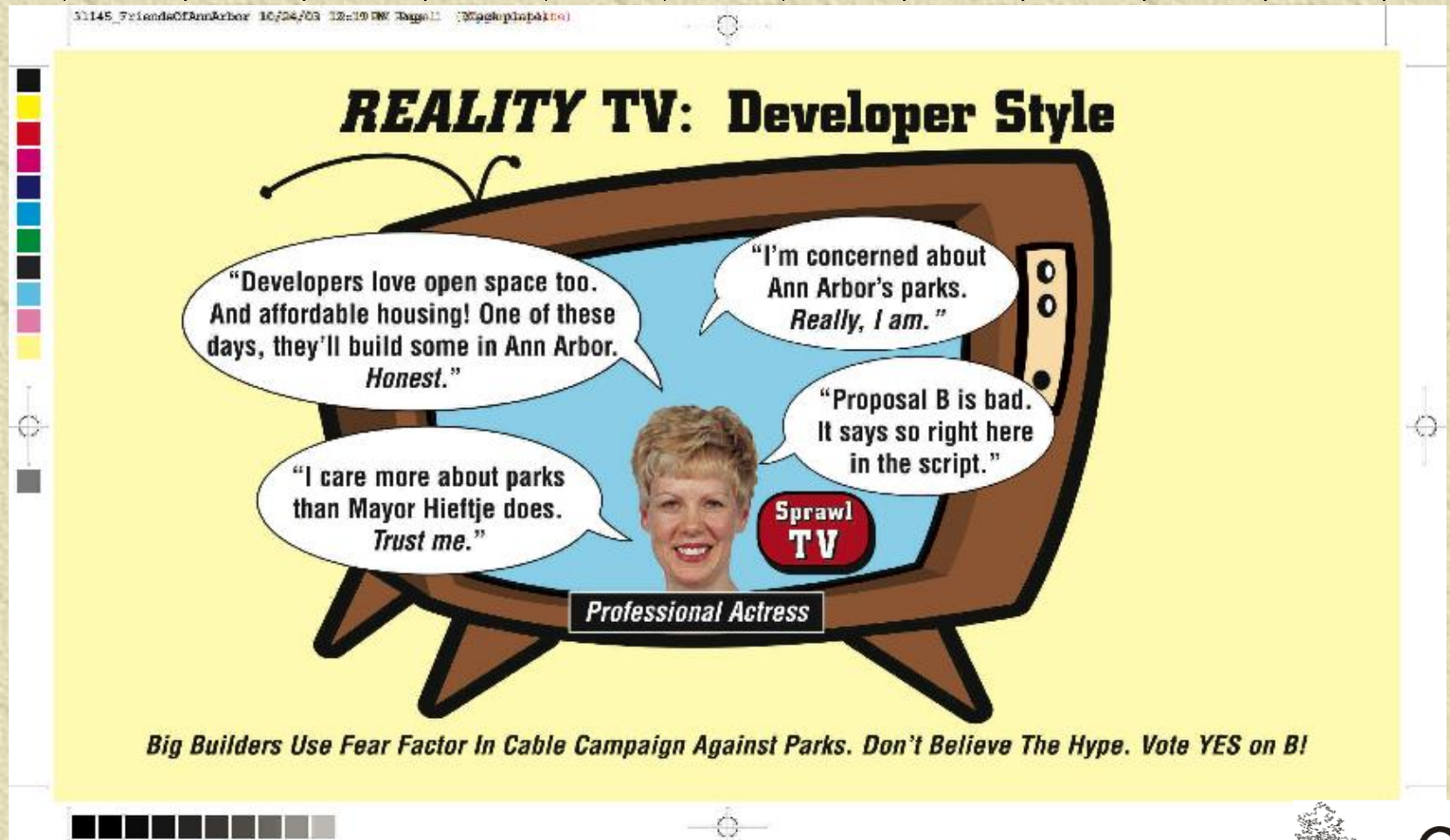


Campaign Specifics

- ✦ High-quality print materials
- ✦ Huge grassroots volunteer network (300+)
- ✦ Door-to-door canvassers
- ✦ GOTV phone banks
- ✦ High-volume direct mail, targeted radio and print ads
- ✦ Prepared Rapid Response Strategy – TV Ads



No Attack Goes Unanswered



No Greenwash Allowed - Identify the Opponents!

Big Developers Cry BOO on B



Their lobbyists, armed with Big Money and Tall Tales, roll into town to scare Ann Arbor voters about Proposal B



Other Key Messages

- ✦ Renew community's commitment to parks as a way to balance growth
- ✦ Proposal would not raise taxes
- ✦ Reduce environmental problems related to sprawl
- ✦ Broad support
- ✦ "Our people, our parks, our home"



Other Campaign Highlights

- ✦ Mayor John Hieftje key spokesperson
- ✦ Debate at Michigan Theater before 1,000 people
- ✦ Extensive media coverage
- ✦ Campaign raised \$215K, opponents \$230K
- ✦ Business sector support from Pfizer, McKinley, ProQuest, Bill Ford Jr., others
- ✦ Excellent voter lists for mail and phone appeals



Land Preservation Mops Up the Opposition

✦ City of Ann Arbor votes
67%-33%

✦ Ann Arbor Township votes
77%-23%



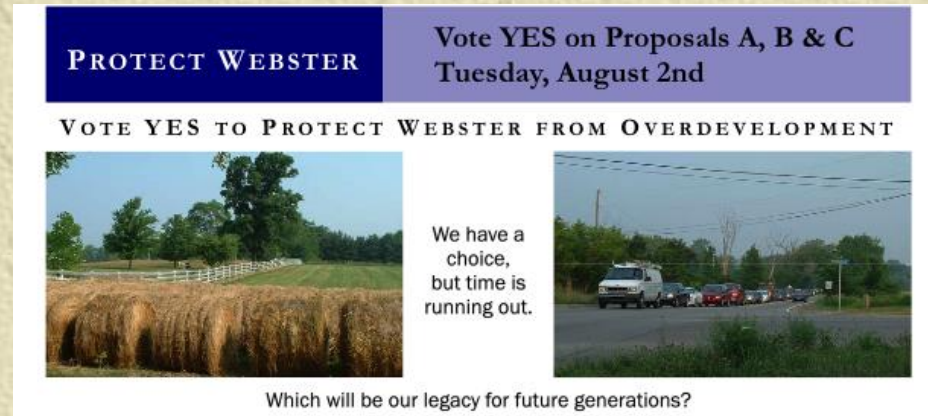
Scio Township 2003 Proposal



- ✦ 0.5 mills, ten years
- ✦ \$6 million generated
- ✦ Passed with 75% support



Webster Township 2004



- ✦ 0.5 mills for five years
- ✦ \$900,000 generated
- ✦ First rural township to pass, 70% support
- ✦ MHP proposal catalyst



Arguments

- ✦ Support agriculture, fresh food
- ✦ Maintain landscapes
- ✦ Protect water quality, habitat, scenic views
- ✦ Carbon storage/capacity



Millage Renewals—and New

- ✦ Webster Township 2009, 60% support
- ✦ Webster Township 2014, 73% support
- ✦ Webster Township 2024, 63% support
- ✦ Scio Township 2012, 70% support
- ✦ Scio Township 2022, 68% support
- ✦ Washtenaw County 2010, 58% support
 - ◆ 25% of renewal funds for farmland CEs
- ✦ Washtenaw County 2020, 72% support
- ✦ Dexter and Northfield November, 2022
- ✦ Ann Arbor Township 2024, 76% support

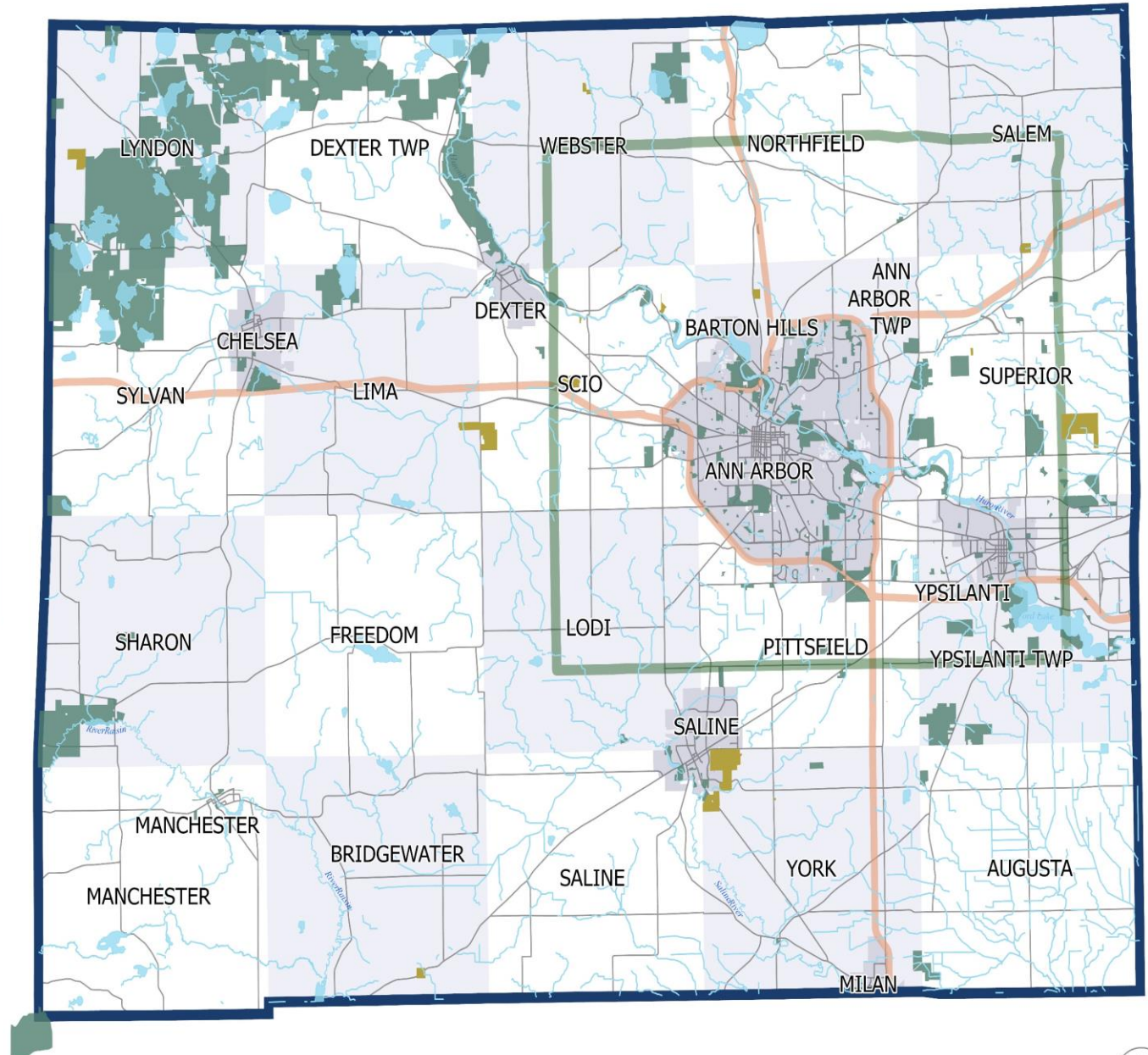


2000 Protected Lands in Washtenaw County

Updated 2/18/2025



- Conservation Land (2000) *
- Public Recreation Land (2000)
- Ann Arbor Greenbelt
- Lakes/Rivers
- Streams
- Freeway
- Major Roads



* Not open to public; access by appointment

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Washtenaw County Parks & Recreation Commission (WCPARC)
washtenaw/parks.org - (734) 971-6337

Data Source:
Washtenaw County GIS

0 2.5 5 10 Miles

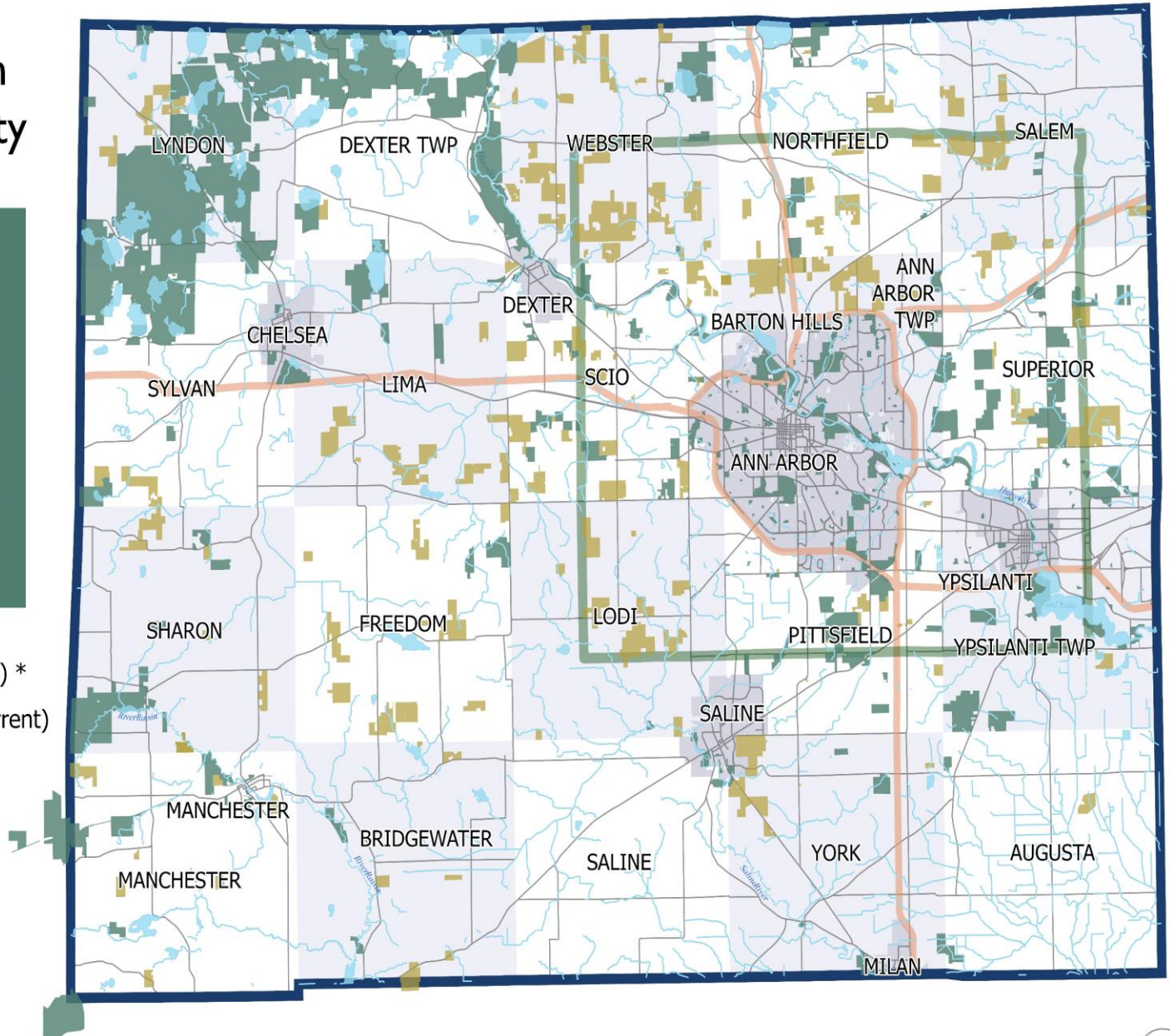


2025 Protected Lands in Washtenaw County

Updated 2/18/2025



- Conservation Land (Current) *
- Public Recreation Land (Current)
- Ann Arbor Greenbelt
- Lakes/Rivers
- Streams
- Freeway
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0 2.5 5 10 Miles



In 25 years...

- ✦ Protected lands 2000: ~32,000 acres
- ✦ Protected lands 2025: ~57,000 acres
- ✦ Increase of 25,000 acres!! (78%)
- ✦ Farm transfers to local food producers
(buy-protect-sell)

Lessons Learned

- ✦ The first one is always the hardest
- ✦ Know your community and how to win elections there—especially with opposition
- ✦ Be prepared to take off the gloves—don't tolerate greenwash or leave attacks unanswered
- ✦ Champions can be very helpful
- ✦ Fundraising critical – you must have enough money to cover basic costs and respond if opposition attacks in every medium
- ✦ Website, mailer, yard signs at minimum

