
Local Public Funding for Land Preservation: How to Get There!



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Washtenaw County Michigan



Ann Arbor
University of

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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
- ✦ Homebuilders spent \$330,000 to defeat
- ✦ Grassroots v. mass market, direct mail v. TV
- ✦ Lost 58%-42%
- ✦ Post-election poll said many voters did not know who funded opposition
- ✦ Won only in City of 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



Keep trying!!

- ✦ Petition drive to raise \$8M to buy Ann Arbor natural areas (1999)
- ✦ No organized opposition -- wins 65%-35%
- ✦ Broad coalition to support \$30M plan to buy Washtenaw County natural areas (2000) with 10-Year 0.25-Mill Levy
- ✦ Wins 64%-36%



2003 Proposals

City of Ann Arbor Parks and Greenbelt proposal (0.5 mill) for 30 years; passed with 67% support to generate \$60M, 2/3 to be spent outside the city

Ann Arbor Township (0.7-mill, 20 years) proposal to generate \$8M for farmland preservation; passed with 77% support



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



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



Scio Township 2004




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




Webster Township 2005

PROTECT WEBSTER Vote YES on Proposals A, B & C
Tuesday, August 2nd

VOTE YES TO PROTECT WEBSTER FROM OVERDEVELOPMENT



We have a choice, but time is running out.



Which will be our legacy for future generations?

- ✦ 0.5 mills for five years
- ✦ \$925,000 generated
- ✦ First rural township to pass, 70% support



Publicly funded programs in Washtenaw County MI

- ✦ Washtenaw County Natural Area
Preservation Program (natural areas and
farmland)
- ✦ City of Ann Arbor Greenbelt Program
- ✦ Ann Arbor, Scio, Webster Townships
- ✦ Dexter and Northfield Townships
- ✦ Augusta Township
- ✦ Eight of 12 in Michigan



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

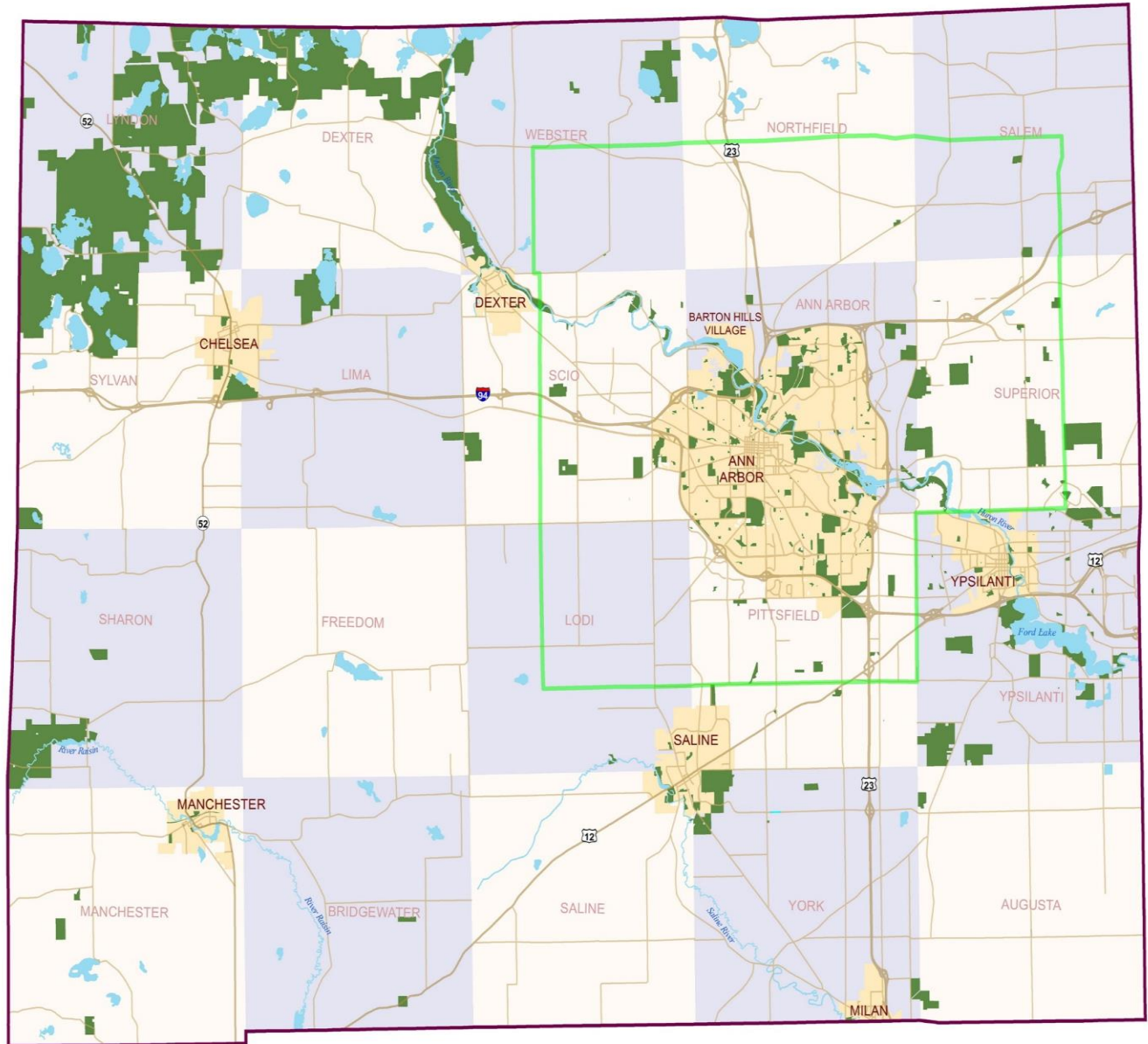


Protected Lands in Washtenaw County 2000

10/11/2019

-  Protected Land⁺
-  Ann Arbor Greenbelt Boundary
-  Lakes/Rivers
-  River
-  Highway
-  Major Road

⁺ Some land is closed to the public

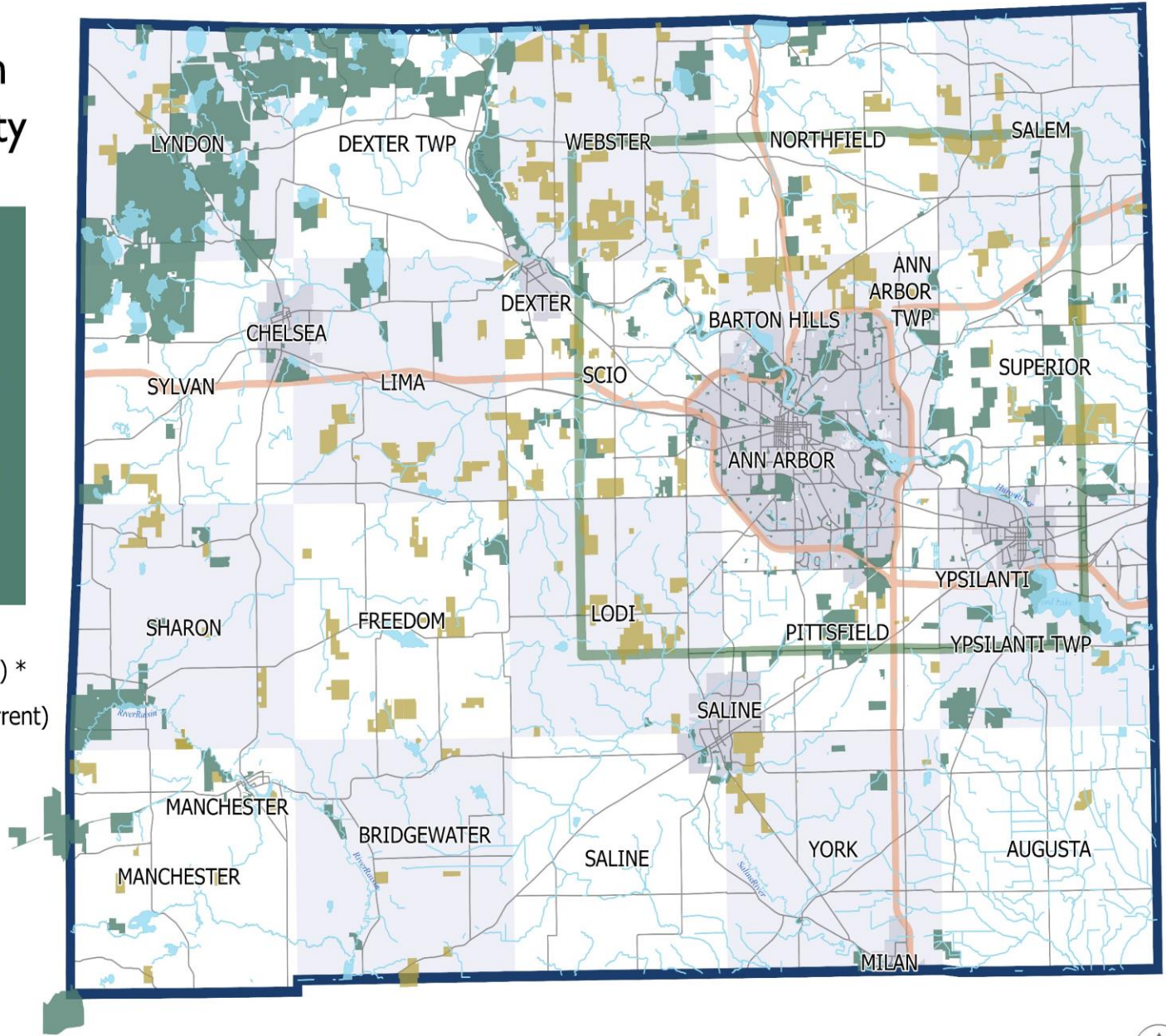


2025 Protected Lands in Washtenaw County

Updated 2/18/2025



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



* Not open to public; access by appointment



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)



How to get on the ballot!

- ✦ Contact elected officials, find champion
- ✦ Rally citizen support, esp. farmers
- ✦ Citizen pressure: calls, emails, petitions, public statements
- ✦ Vote them out!! (Dexter Township)
- ✦ Higher voter turnout → better chances for success



Running a campaign

- ✦ Raising funds: letter, QR code, calls, bank account, officers (chair, treasurer)
- ✦ Yard signs, mailers, website, events
- ✦ Doors, calls, door hangers, radio, print
- ✦ GOTV election day (poll sites with lit)
- ✦ www.hrwc.org/what-we-do/programs/advocacy-and-policy/millage-toolkit/



Arguments

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



Economics

- ✦ Farmland and open space properties pay up
- ✦ Residential properties cost more than pay
- ✦ Schools are expensive
- ✦ Taxes: for what, how much and how long
- ✦ Got nothing, get nothing; got something...



WHEN you win!

- ✦ Ordinance and scoring system
- ✦ Advisory committee
- ✦ Staffing
- ✦ Vendors for due diligence: surveyor, appraiser, ESA, legal



Public program process

- ✦ Voluntary application/db/mailing
- ✦ Educational events for landowners
- ✦ Personal contact through neighbors
- ✦ Scoring and ranking
- ✦ Pursuit of matching funds
- ✦ Due diligence—appraisal, ESA, survey, legal review, baseline documentation
- ✦ Recording



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 & examples 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

