



Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission

MEMORANDUM

To: Rolland Sizemore, Jr., Chair
Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners

Through: Robert E. Guenzel
County Administrator

From: Robert L. Tetens, Director
Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission

Date: April 14, 2010

Re: Clarification: Natural Areas Preservation Program – Ordinance No. 128

Background

The Washtenaw County Natural Areas Preservation Program (NAPP) was established by the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners with the passage of Ordinance No. 128 in August 2000. Funding for NAPP comes from a 10 year, dedicated millage approved by Washtenaw County voters in November 2000. The Board of Commissioners charged the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission with implementation of the Program and management of the protected lands. Ordinance No. 128 also established the Natural Areas Technical Advisory Committee to serve as an advisory body and assist the Parks and Recreation Commission in consideration of nominated properties.

The stated purpose of the Natural Areas Preservation Program is to preserve and protect unique natural areas within Washtenaw County. Ordinance No. 128 notes that “Washtenaw County is a desirable place to live, work and visit in large part because of the existence of natural areas within the County.” The Ordinance further notes “the purchase of natural areas can be used to protect fragile lands and environmentally threatened lands.”

Since its inception, the Washtenaw County Natural Areas Preservation Program has protected over 1800 acres of land. As a result, 17 new nature preserves have been established and made available to the public for their use and enjoyment. The Program has established strong working relationships with many of the communities within Washtenaw County and with other land preservation organizations such as the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy and Legacy Land Conservancy. NAPP was also recognized by the National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials in 2006 for “Outstanding Accomplishment in the Field of Parks and Recreation.”

Discussion

As noted above, over 1800 acres of land have been protected by the Natural Areas Preservation Program. The protected property contains many unique areas, including critical habitat for birds, animals and plants. Also included within the protected properties are active agricultural fields that comprised a portion of the larger parcel that was nominated for consideration by the Natural Areas Preservation Program. The review of properties

nominated for consideration has certainly shown there are very few parcels within Washtenaw County that do not have a mix of active and inactive areas. In reviewing properties over the years, the Natural Areas Technical Advisory Committee determined the presence of active agricultural use did not preclude consideration of a property as a natural area. Ordinance No. 128 defines natural areas land as “any land which provides the function of conserving natural resources, including the promotion of the conservation of soils, wetlands and waterways, habitat, and special plants, animals, and plant communities.” An active agricultural field, when managed according to established guidelines, certainly fits that definition.

The 10 year term of the dedicated millage which supports the Washtenaw County Natural Areas Preservation Program will end effective December 1, 2010. Deliberations as to whether to place that millage on the ballot in November 2010 are underway. Prior to placing the millage on the ballot it has been suggested by representatives of local land preservation organizations that the language in Ordinance No. 128 be clarified. The clarification would recognize the presence of active agricultural use within many of the properties considered by NAPP. Such a clarification would remove any potential misunderstanding by the public. Specifically, a reference to agricultural lands would be included in “SECTION 2: Definitions” of the Ordinance. In addition, in a fashion consistent with the role of the Natural Areas Technical Advisory Committee, the Ordinance would allow the Agricultural Lands Preservation Advisory Committee (ALPAC) to provide the Parks and Recreation Commission with technical assistance in reviewing land. The input of ALPAC would ensure that the active agricultural component of the nominated properties was of high quality and, if acquired, was managed in a manner consistent with the purpose of the Washtenaw County Natural Areas Preservation Program. As noted above, the proposed clarification of Ordinance No. 128 was prepared in collaboration with representatives from local land preservation organizations, including the Legacy Land Conservancy and the Ecology Center. A copy is attached for your information.

Recommendation

At their regularly scheduled meeting of April 13, 2010, the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission unanimously resolved to support the proposed clarification of Ordinance No. 128 so as to ensure the public is fully informed of the purpose and intent of the Washtenaw County Natural Areas Preservation Program.