

Regional planning for coordinated and connected open spaces

Washtenaw County has become a leader in the state in preserving open space, with numerous voter-approved initiatives and conservancies actively working towards this goal. But with the multitude of fragmented efforts comes the risk that wheels will turn in different directions, less efficiently than if resources are pooled and efforts coordinated. The Washtenaw Metro Alliance (WMA)—centered on the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti area—has formed to maximize regional cooperation in a variety of areas. One of their initiatives is a coordinated approach to parks and open space preservation.

Washtenaw Metro Alliance members have made a connected parks and open space system a priority. To achieve this, a thorough inventory and analysis of the region will be completed to identify properties that fill in gaps between currently preserved areas. With this data and public input, they plan to prepare a final plan for a region-wide system of parks, open spaces, greenways and paths.

Connected systems have many benefits over a patchwork of isolated parks and open spaces: Connections between schools, employment, parks, and residential areas allow safe biking and walking paths as an alternative to auto travel. Links between natural areas create wildlife corridors that allow animals to travel to find food and mates, preventing inbreeding and increasing the species' resiliency. Buffers along waterways filter pollutants and prevent flooding. In general, connected systems increase quality of life for both humans and wildlife.

Open space and greenways also make economic sense. Numerous studies show that they increase property values, boost tourism, strengthen the success of existing businesses, and attract new businesses and residents. For details on these studies, go to the “economics of trails” link at www.americantrails.org/resources/.

Providing connections is not the only reason to conserve land. Other important values to consider are: prime agricultural land, cultural significance, and sensitive natural features such as wetlands, woodlands and groundwater recharge areas. (Recharge areas are earth surfaces where water infiltrates into the ground and replenishes drinking water aquifers. These sensitive areas can be susceptible to pollution that is associated with development, such as runoff from roofs and roadways, or application of chemicals to landscaping).

WMA hopes to identify which open spaces in Washtenaw County are most important to conserve, and the most efficient means of doing so. WMA meetings are held at 9 a.m. the first Thursday of every other month (June 2nd being the next). They are open to the public and are held in the County Annex Building's 1st Floor Conference Room located at 110 North 4th Avenue, Ann Arbor.

Public input is so essential to the process that a special “Parks & Open Space Visioning Public Workshop” is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Monday, June 6, at Washtenaw Community College's Morris Lawrence Building (4800 E. Huron River Drive).

For more on the WMA, please go to www.ewashtenaw.org, and search “Washtenaw Metro Alliance.”

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