



SAVING FOR THE FUTURE: LAND CONSERVATION IN DETROIT

**DETROIT
FUTURE
CITY**

SAVING FOR THE FUTURE: LAND CONSERVATION IN DETROIT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its peak in 1950, Detroit has lost 1.2 million residents, a 65% decline in its population. This population loss led to dramatic levels of vacancy, with numerous vacant buildings and more than 18 square miles of vacant land in 2025. While Detroit's population appears to finally be stabilizing or even growing, vacancy remains a substantial issue with more than 100,000 vacant lots in the city. Many factors make traditional redevelopment strategies on vacant properties extremely difficult.

There are numerous negative impacts of vacant land on communities and providing even the most basic maintenance demands significant resources. Detroit currently contracts for vacant land to be mowed five times a year at an estimated cost of \$1.35 million.

Conversely, Detroit's vacant land offers an opportunity to transform large amounts of vacant land into green space, or open space, for community benefit. Open space in the city can take many forms, including urban agriculture, parkland, community gathering spaces, and natural areas. The transformation of vacant land into open space can provide numerous positive impacts, including:

- Improving physical and mental health.
- Increasing property values.
- Increasing safety.
- Improving air quality and mitigating noise pollution.
- Protecting against the impacts of climate change.
- Increasing habitat for native species.

Land conservancies provide a crucial missing tool to support the creation and protection of open space in Detroit. A land conservancy is nonprofit dedicated to the long-term protection and management of open space. In other communities their expertise in land protection has allowed them to be particularly adept at supporting open space through specialized tools and opportunities, including:

- Property tax exemptions for land held for conservation purposes.
- The ability to hold conservation easements.
- State liability protection for activities that take place on conservation land.
- Access to funding, resources, and technical support reserved for land conservation organizations.

The use of land conservancies in rural areas to preserve natural resources has been practiced for more than a century, but their use in urban communities is relatively new and have proven to be a flexible and adept tool for preserving community open space.

In Detroit, the opportunities for a land conservancy to support open space are numerous, but a critical need for their support is in the protection and creation of “natural areas,” such as forests, prairies, and wetlands. Natural areas provide greater ecological services and habitat than many other types of open space.

Research, community engagement, and interviews have greatly informed a vision for how a land conservancy should function in Detroit. Fundamental elements for a Detroit land conservancy include:

Purpose: Reduce vacant land and increase open space to improve community safety, health, and recreation.

Geography: The entirety of the cities of Detroit, Highland Park, and Hamtramck.

Designs: Primarily focused on simpler, lower cost designs that are identified and designed in collaboration with community members.

Strategies: The use of a diverse set of tools and approaches to create new and protect exiting open spaces.

Partnerships: Should build on, complement, and support the existing work of others.

Regional Connections: Success of land conservation efforts will be greater when coordinating efforts regionally.

Detroit Future City is committed to shepherding the formation of a land conservancy in Detroit. The next steps in the process include:

- Continued community engagement.
- Determining the appropriate size and scale of projects.
- Developing criteria for land protection.
- Identifying goals for conservation.
- Identifying location of land to protect.
- Identifying cost and funding sources.

This report shares information about the current conditions of vacant land, who is responsible for that property, and the value of open space. It provides insight into the functions of land conservancies, and the tools they use as well as how they have been used successfully in other communities. It shares insights from community engagement from fundamental elements to a successful land conservancy, to steps that will need to be taken to steward a land conservancy into fruition and DFC’s commitment to that process.

INTRODUCTION



Photo credit: Tafari Stevenson-Howard | Location: Detroit Hives, Detroit

Green space, unlike vacant land, is intentionally shaped, transformed, and stewarded for community benefit. Green space, also known as open space, takes many forms, including urban agriculture, parkland, community gathering spaces, and natural areas. Residents, local governments, and numerous organizations have all been a part of open-space development in Detroit. Though much has been accomplished that is worth celebrating, much work remains to be done.

There continues to be a staggering inventory of more than 100,000 vacant lots in Detroit, the equivalent of about 18 square miles.ⁱ Ninety-two percent of the sites that could be created through the assembly and combination of these single lots are less than an acre in sizeⁱⁱ, and few are the type of large, contiguous parcels generally needed for conventional redevelopment strategies. The acquisition and assemblage of single lots to create larger parcels is complex, costly, and often politically fraught. This adds an additional layer of complexity to Detroit's already challenging and expensive development landscape. Furthermore, 79% of the vacant lots in the city are zoned R1 or R2 (single-family residential),ⁱⁱⁱ and current market conditions make the redevelopment of these properties, even in Detroit's strongest real estate markets, difficult.

These challenges present an opportunity for Detroit to move beyond traditional development strategies and embrace plans that center open space to create thriving, resilient neighborhoods. A key tool for accomplishing this is the creation of a land conservancy. A **land conservancy**ⁱ, sometimes referred to as a land trust, is a nonprofit dedicated to the long-term protection and management of open space, or green space. Land conservancies have a long history of protecting, restoring, and managing natural areas in rural and suburban communities. Their potential is quickly being realized in urban communities around the country, as well. In Baltimore, acres of urban forests have been protected^{iv}. In Chicago, more than 100 community green spaces have been secured^v, and in Cleveland, large new parks have been created^{vi}. The long history and creative application of land conservancies in urban communities make them an ideal tool for supporting natural areas in Detroit.

This report shares findings from a yearlong process by Detroit Future City (DFC) to facilitate community conversations and conduct nationwide research to evaluate the value and feasibility of creating a land conservancy to support open space in Detroit. It provides background on who is currently stewarding Detroit's vacant land and open space, and highlights the value that open space offers residents. It identifies how land conservancies have traditionally functioned in rural and suburban areas, the tools they use to protect open space, and the recent applications of conservancies in urban communities. Case studies share national models of what a land conservancy could look like in a Detroit context. Finally, it shares recommendations for how a land conservancy could function in Detroit, some of the steps needed to actualize a land conservancy, and elaborates on Detroit Future City's commitment to shepherding a land conservancy into fruition.

ⁱ Land conservancies are sometimes called land trusts. For clarity, this report uses the term "land conservancy" to distinguish them from community land trusts. Both organizational types are dedicated to long-term protection of land. Community land trusts are focused primarily on affordable housing, while land conservancies are primarily focused on protecting natural resources.

LAND CONSERVANCIES AND COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS IN MICHIGAN

Land conservancies and community land trusts (CLTs) are nonprofits that typically work to hold land for community benefit. Though similar, there are major differences in their focus and how they operate. CLTs are generally focused on affordable housing, while land conservancies are generally focused on preserving natural resources and open space. One way CLTs ensure permanent housing affordability is by selling homes on CLT-owned land while retaining ownership of the underlying land. Homeowners then lease the land from the CLT with restrictions placed on the resale of the house to maintain long-term affordability. Land conservancies work to provide long-term protection of natural resources and open space through a variety of legal tools. These two types of organizations also frequently differ in their governance and areas of coverage.



Photo credit: Tafari Stevenson-Howard | Location: William Milliken State Park, Detroit



Photo credit: Detroit Future City Staff | Location: O'Hair Park, Detroit

CASE STUDY

NeighborSpace, Chicago: Protecting Community Green Space

In 1993, a collaborative planning process was initiated in Chicago that led to the publication of CitySpace: An Open Space Plan for Chicago. A key finding of this planning process was that community-led greening projects provide vital public spaces, especially in neighborhoods underserved by traditional parks and preserves. Yet, many of these community spaces lacked legal protection or long-term support. NeighborSpace, a 501(c)3 land conservancy, was established in 1996 through the combined efforts of community members, local government, and philanthropy to protect, support, and grow these critical community spaces.

NeighborSpace stewards a total of 33 acres of community green space in more than 140 locations across 33 wards in Chicago. The organization supports a broad range of uses, including greenways, urban agriculture, art spaces, community gathering spaces, and recreation areas. Sites are community-led and -governed, and must request that their projects be protected by NeighborSpace. Approximately 15% of the project sites are leased, with the remainder directly owned by NeighborSpace.

NeighborSpace's governance model includes a board made up of community leaders, gardeners and supporters. The board also includes seven dedicated positions to be held by government leaders, including those from the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. In addition to their leadership, these three governmental entities have established long-term intergovernmental agreements to support NeighborSpace, and provide \$465,000 in annual financial support. This ensures NeighborSpace has a minimum operating budget while connecting its work to the goals of the supporting governmental organizations.

The focus of NeighborSpace's work is to hold and protect land so it remains a community asset and to "steward the stewards" who care for the land. NeighborSpace supports green space stewards through access to a tool bank, fiscal management for groups without 501(c)3 status, fundraising, support with volunteer recruitment, and support for garden improvements.

In addition, NeighborSpace provides support for communities to identify opportunities for green space development, community organizing, land research and assessment, land acquisition, and soil remediation.

All green space sites protected by NeighborSpace require the completion of a partnership agreement between NeighborSpace, a community organization partner, garden leadership team, and garden stakeholders. The partnership agreement identifies roles and responsibilities, site guidelines, and conflict resolution methods. NeighborSpace is responsible for compliance with City regulations and basic insurance and facilitates access to water.

NeighborSpace is supported by a staff of seven, its Board of Directors, and countless community members and volunteers. In addition to the ongoing funding from the City of Chicago, Chicago Park District, and Forest Preserves of Cook County, NeighborSpace's approximately \$1.7 million budget is funded through contributions from philanthropic, federal, and state funding. It receives municipal funding through Chicago's Open Space Impact Fee, Tax Increment Financing (TIF), and other means.

Source: NeighborSpace Chicago

LAND OWNERSHIP AND STEWARDSHIP IN DETROIT

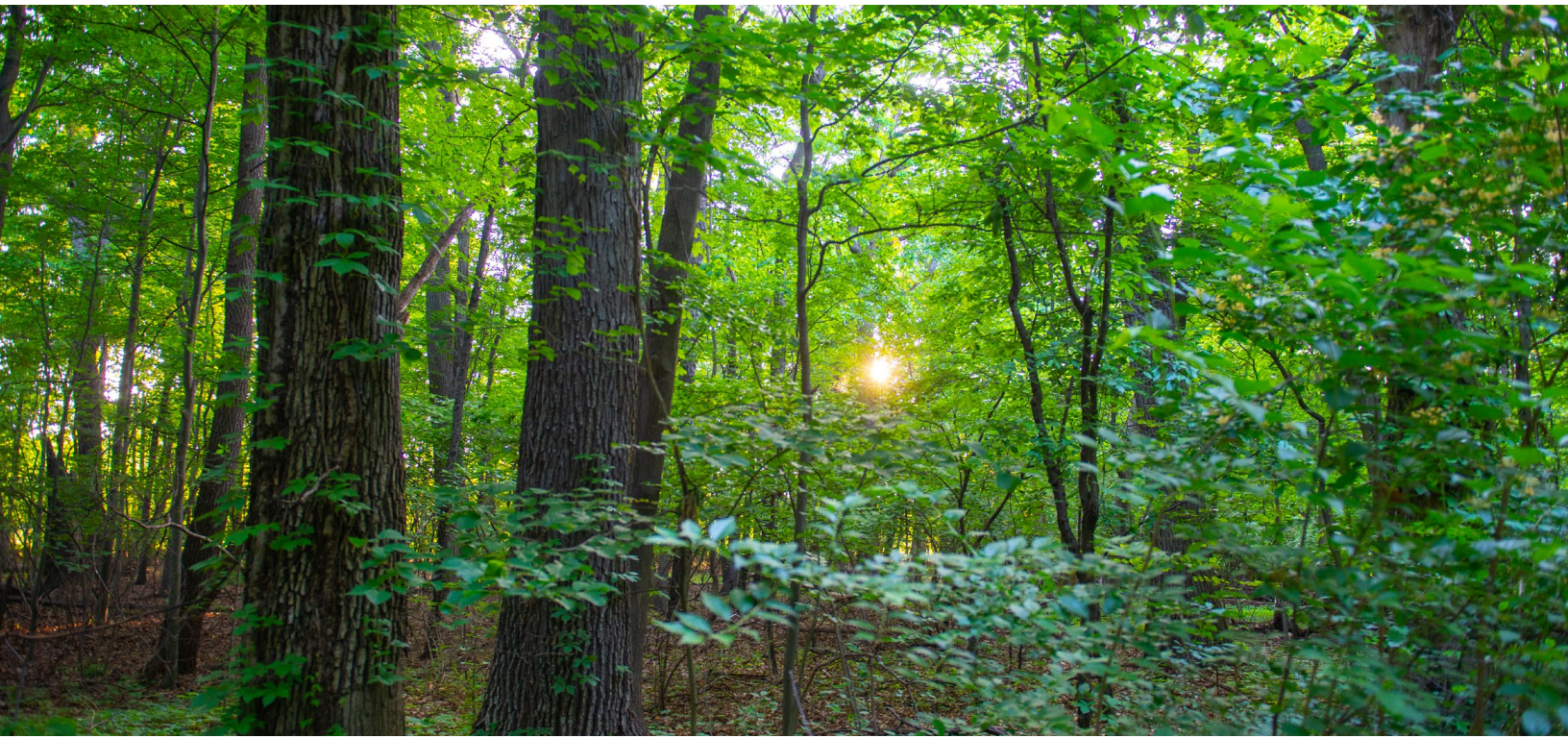


Photo credit: Tafari Stevenson-Howard | Location: Palmer Woods, Detroit

Knowledge of who the major vacant land owners in Detroit are and their role in land holding is critical to understanding the current landscape of the city and identifying the opportunities for alternative land tenure. The largest owner of vacant land in the city, by far, is the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA), which holds 59,617 vacant lots in its inventory—more than half the vacant lots in Detroit.^{vii} Unlike private owners who acquire property for development or see the land as an investment opportunity, the DLBA was created to be the owner of last resort, acquiring property after it has passed through tax foreclosure and reverted to public ownership. The DLBA's mission is not to be a long-term steward of property but to “strengthen Detroit's neighborhoods by transforming vacant and abandoned properties into inclusive community assets.”^{viii} The DLBA is a public agency, with its budget approved by the City Council and four of its five board members appointed by the mayor.^{ix} In 2024, the City of Detroit provided \$11 million^x toward the DLBA's \$26.1 million operating budget.^{xi} The City of Detroit's Planning and Development Department holds 5,381 lots, largely commercial parcels identified for redevelopment opportunities.^{xii} Private landowners hold an additional 41,685 vacant lots.^{xiii}

Despite Detroit's current massive inventory of vacant land, there is good news. The DLBA's inventory is substantially smaller than it once was. In 2016, the DLBA's inventory of vacant lots was over 67,000.^{xiv} The DLBA has sold 28,801 vacant lots through January of 2025 for residential side lots, urban agriculture, and community beautification.^{xv} Concerns over safety, negative impacts of vacant structures, and a desire to connect salvageable structures with those that will rehabilitate them has caused the DLBA to focus its efforts on vacant structures.^{xvi} With 90% of the DLBA's current inventory consisting of vacant land, the focus of future disposition will likely be vacant property.^{xvii}

Understanding who is currently managing open space and vacant land in the city is necessary to comprehend the scale of existing efforts, the resources dedicated to this stewardship, and the capacity to provide better services. The largest steward of open space is the City of Detroit, caring for 5,035 acres of dedicated parkland and 1,075 acres of boulevards, golf courses, and other community spaces.^{xviii} The 2024 City budget dedicates over \$24 million for the management of parks and public space.^{xix} The City also provides basic maintenance to more than 100,000 private and publicly owned vacant lots at an expense. The City contracts for limited debris removal and mowing of lots five times a year at an estimated cost of \$13.44 per lot,^{xx} approximately \$1.35 million in total.^{xxi,2}

Though many Detroit residents would like greater levels of investment in, and maintenance of, vacant land, under the current budget constraints and limited capacity, there are significant challenges for the City and the DLBA to do so.^{xxii} Additionally, it is unlikely that all of the DLBA's more than 59,000 scattered site parcels will be used for traditional redevelopment, such as housing or commercial development, in the foreseeable future. Transferring some of this vacant land to a land conservancy and transforming it into open space would provide public benefit while decreasing the amount of Detroit's vacant land and reducing the responsibilities, liabilities, and operating expenses of the City and the DLBA.

² Calculation based on City of Detroit FAQ on Vacant Lots and a 2024 City of Detroit Requests for Quotes (RFQ) for mowing services. The \$1.35 million figure is based on 100,107 lots mowed at a cost of \$13.44 per lot.

THE VALUE OF OPEN SPACE TO DETROIT RESIDENTS

Since its peak in 1950, Detroit has experienced a 65% decline in its population.^{xxiii} The loss of more than 1.2 million residents has created high levels of vacancy in many neighborhoods.^{xxiv} The negative environmental, economic, social, and health impacts of blighted vacant lots to residents are widely documented and well known.^{xxv} Despite the recent growth in the city's population, reversing a decades long trend, the majority of Detroit's neighborhoods continue to experience population loss. Since 2012, 62% of Detroit's census tracts have experienced a loss of more than 5% of their population.^{xxvi} Continued population loss will impact Detroit through increased vacancy, lower property tax revenue, loss of federal funding tied to the city's population, and strained budgets as resources are stretched further across neighborhoods. Well-designed and managed open space is the antithesis of vacant land, stabilizing neighborhoods, creating community assets, improving health, and halting the process of neighborhood disinvestment and population loss. A few key benefits of open space include:



Open space supports positive physical and mental health.

Residents in Philadelphia reported a 63% reduction in poor mental health two years after vacant lots in their community were cleaned up and planted with trees.^{xxvii} Numerous studies have found that residents living near green space have lower risk of cardiovascular disease.^{xxviii} Many studies have found multiple benefits for youth that have spent time immersed in green space, including improved cognitive function, lower stress rates, and reduction in symptoms from conditions like ADHD.^{xxix}



Open space and tree canopies increase property values.

Multiple studies have found that homes in areas with tree canopies have increased property values.^{xxx} Homes within 500 feet of a park have 5% higher property values, on average.^{xxxi}



Open space improves safety and increases time spent outdoors.

An additional study in Philadelphia found that residents living near vacant lots that were cleaned up and planted with trees reported a 37% reduction in perception of crime and a 76% increase in using outdoor spaces for relaxing and socializing.^{xxxii}



Open space improves air quality and reduces noise.

Trees have been shown to absorb and capture air pollution;^{xxxiii} and stands of trees approximately 30 to 100 feet wide along highways can decrease noise pollution levels by 3 to 5 decibels.^{xxxiv}



Open space helps communities mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

Forests and native prairies have been shown to sequester large amounts of greenhouse gases.^{xxxv} Areas with tree canopies can lower pedestrian-level temperatures as much as 21 degrees.^{xxxvi} Tree canopy and vegetation can slow and retain rainwater, reducing sewer overflows, basement backups, and flooding.



Open space supports habitat creation, supporting native plants, birds, and pollinators.

Many species native to Southeast Michigan are rarely or never seen in Detroit due to habitat destruction. The preservation and development of open spaces designed to support native species can greatly increase biodiversity.

A variety of open space provides some of the above benefits; natural areas combine them all. As the need to develop and implement strategies to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change continues to grow, the incorporation of natural areas into the city's land use framework will become increasingly important.

CASE STUDY

Baltimore Green Space: Preserving Natural Resources

Baltimore Green Space is a 501(c)3 land conservancy founded in 2007 to protect community open spaces and forest patches. It protects 72 acres of community-led gardens, pocket parks, and forests throughout Baltimore.

Established green-space stewards may apply to request that their project become a part of Baltimore Green Space's conservancy. The organization then works with the City or private landowners to transfer qualified projects into Baltimore Green Space's conservancy and establishes a management agreement with a site manager and community partner. Baltimore Green Space ensures that properties are kept as a community open-space asset in perpetuity and provides technical assistance and basic liability coverage for the site. Technical assistance includes connecting sites to grant resources, community organizing and outreach support, and help with access to water.

Over its 18-year existence, Baltimore Green Space has embraced an iterative philosophy to its work, reacting to and adapting to community needs, and changing as need arises. In 2012, community members approached Baltimore Green Space to request support for protection of threatened forest patches (areas approximately half an acre in size) in their neighborhoods. Finding that more than 20% of Baltimore's tree canopy is in forest patches and recognizing the many important benefits tree canopies provide, Baltimore Green Space created the Forest Stewardship Network. It now supports the stewardship of 10 forest patches, varying in size from a quarter acre to 20 acres and covering a total of more than 33 acres. Baltimore Green Space provides forest stewards with connections to experts on natural resource management, hands-on workshops, and provides long-term land protection.

In addition, it protects and holds a conservation easement on the 54-acre Masonville Cove site, the nation's first "Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership." The Masonville Cove site includes a nature education center, a fishing pier, hiking trails, and a giant trash-eating machine called Captain Trash Wheel. It is home to the first known pair of nesting bald eagles in recent history in Baltimore.

Baltimore Green Space has worked extensively to develop policies to support natural resource protection in Baltimore. This includes the development of policies to support the transfer of City-owned land to conservancies, to create property-tax exemptions for land trusts in Baltimore, and strengthen an existing tree ordinance to protect smaller forests. The group has partnered extensively with scientists and community members to develop research in support of its work and inform its green-space management practices.

Baltimore Green Space is supported by a staff of six, and has an operating budget of approximately \$880,000. It is supported financially through a mix of sources, with 2% of its funding coming from the State of Maryland, 18% from the City of Baltimore, and 37% from federal sources. Additional support comes from local foundations and individual donations.

Source: Baltimore Green Space



Photo courtesy of Baltimore Greenspace, Baltimore



Photo credit: Arboretum Detroit | Location: Circle Forest, Detroit

LAND CONSERVANCIES: A TOOL TO PROTECT LAND FOR PUBLIC BENEFIT

The concept of an organization holding land to protect and manage valuable open space goes back more than 100 years in the United States.^{xxxvii} Land conservancies have traditionally been used as tools in rural or suburban areas to limit sprawling development and preserve natural resources like farmland, wetlands, and forests. The land conservancy movement has grown to approximately 1,700 organizations nationwide providing long-term protection to a combined 47 million acres of land.^{xxxviii}

In Michigan, the official name for a recognized tax-exempt conservation group is a Qualified Conservation Organization, defined as having been established “for the purpose of acquiring, maintaining, and protecting nature sanctuaries, nature preserves, and natural areas in this state, that predominantly contains natural habitat for fish, wildlife, and plants.”^{xxxix} Like all nonprofits, land conservancies are eligible for charitable donations and exempt from income, sales, and property taxes. Their legal designation and specialization in land acquisition and holding affords them several key advantages for the protection of open space:

- **Land conservancies are generally exempt from property taxes.**

The State of Michigan specifically identifies land owned by Michigan Qualified Conservation Organizations for conservation purposes to be exempt from property taxes. Tax exemptions reduce operating costs.

- **Land conservancies can hold conservation easements.**

Land conservancies are specifically recognized by the State of Michigan as one of the primary legal entities that may hold conservation easements. Conservation easements separate the development rights from the land and transfer them to another party. See Page 27 for more details on conservation easements.

- **Land conservancies may be shielded from liability that occurs on their land.**

The State of Michigan’s Recreational Land Use Statute shields private landowners from some liability that occurs on their land when people are invited to engage in recreational activities.^{xl} Examples of covered activities that typically take place on conservation land include walking, bicycling, birding, and fishing.

- **Land conservancies are long-term holders of land.**

Land conservancies are created for long-term protection of land. The assurance of long-term protection and stewardship stability can be used to leverage additional investments and partnerships.

- **Land conservancies are especially skilled in the conservation of open space.**

Land conservancy staff, board, and volunteers have skills in contract, nonprofit and conservation law, real estate, natural resource management, volunteer management, outdoor education, community engagement, and fundraising. These skill sets make them excellent at managing, protecting, and restoring natural areas.

- **Land conservancies can access specialized funding, resources, and technical support.**

Land conservancies are eligible to receive local, state, and federal funding and technical support for land conservation and natural resources management. They can access financing that is available for organizations working on conservation work, and may receive funding from philanthropic organizations focused on land conservation, habitat restoration, and environmental education.

- **Land conservancies are part of an international network.**

Groups such as the Land Trust Alliance at the national level, and Heart of the Lakes at the state level, actively work to create networks of land conservancies. Through these networks, best practices, resources, funding opportunities, and technical support are shared.

There are several land conservancies that work in rural and suburban areas of Southeast Michigan; all have been hesitant to expand their work into Detroit. Land conservation in urban communities like Detroit requires special skills, knowledge, and dedication. Detroit's vacant land parcels can be more costly and challenging to acquire and manage than rural land. Much of Detroit's land has some degree of contamination, construction debris, and introduced a variety of species that add complexity. Conserving, developing, and maintaining land for open space in Detroit requires extensive community engagement and the involvement of many stakeholders. Detroit would be best served by the creation of a land conservancy specifically focused on working within the city.

FOCUS FOR LAND CONSERVATION: PROTECTING AND CREATING NATURAL AREAS

The opportunity to center open space strategies to address vacant land is especially compelling given Detroit's critical need for "natural areas"—protected, restored, or created habitats such as forests, prairies, and wetlands. These natural areas provide greater ecological services, increased biodiversity, and mitigate the impacts of climate change better than traditional parkland.^{xli} Access to natural areas can improve the physical and mental health of residents and provide educational opportunities to connect with the natural world. However, only 20% of the Detroit's parkland is classified as natural areas, compared to the national median of 57%.^{xlii} Additionally, there is the need to protect and improve Detroit's tree canopy, which covers approximately 26% of the city,^{xliii} below the recommended target of 30%.^{xliv} To reach this 30% target would require protecting all existing canopy and adding an additional 3,622 acres of tree canopy.^{xlv} Approximately 19% of Detroit's existing tree canopy is over vacant land with little protection.^{xlvi} Loss of this tree canopy would greatly exacerbate Detroit's environmental inequities. The need for natural areas and tree canopy underscores the opportunity to leverage Detroit's vacant land.



Photo credit: Cydni Elledge, Detroit Design Core | Location: Callahan Park, Detroit

Roles of Land Conservancies in Urban Communities

The application of land conservancies in urban communities has only begun to be realized in the last 25 years, and has taken many different approaches. Urban land conservancies support and protect broader land types, including urban farms, community green spaces, natural areas, and open spaces integrated into housing developments. They commonly have more extensive goals, such as developing and integrating open space for community redevelopment, supporting municipal climate adaptation and mitigation goals, and improving public health.

Urban land conservancies frequently have more expansive programing, including green-space planning, research, community engagement, education, project implementation, advocacy, and policy work. The work of urban conservancies is crucial to regional conservation goals of fostering a greater relationship with the natural world, supporting development that reduces urban sprawl, and increasing access to natural amenities for urban residents.

Many urban land conservancies have worked to complement and support existing landowners. Groups such as NeighborSpace in Chicago and Baltimore Green Space hold land at the request of community members to ensure long-term protection of land, support site improvements, provide basic liability protection, and stewardship support. Other organizations, such as the Western Reserve Land Conservancy in Cleveland, have partnered on the creation of large open-space projects where community members did not have the capacity or wherewithal to see the project through to completion on their own. Detroit's robust community of open-space stewards would provide a land conservancy an incredible opportunity to provide support and forge partnerships.



Photo credit: Tafari Stevenson-Howard | Location: Palmer Woods, Detroit

CASE STUDY

Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy, Bay City, Michigan: Developing Habitat on Urban Land

The Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy (SBLC), based in Bay City, Michigan, is a 501(c)3 land conservancy founded in 1997 that protects more than 6,000 acres across 22 Michigan counties in the Saginaw Bay watershed. This land is protected through a combination of easements on private land and direct ownership of 13 nature preserves open to the public.

In the last 10 years, SBLC has shifted its focus to include land stewardship in the cities of Saginaw and Bay City. Though smaller than Detroit, both cities have experienced similar challenges due to the impacts of disinvestment and population loss.

SBLC has implemented several strategies to support improved community green space and neighborhood quality of life. Through a partnership with the Saginaw County Land Bank, SBLC has established the Pollinator Project. The Saginaw County Land Bank contracts SBLC to clean up, plant, and maintain land bank property. The planting includes a mix of low-growing prairie plants to reduce mowing and native trees to deter illegal dumping. To date, the SBLC has cleaned up and planted more than 1,300 lots. SBLC's efforts have sparked renewed interest in these properties, with 50% of the lots they have cleaned and planted having been sold by the land bank.

In addition to efforts to plant trees on vacant land, SBLC's Taking Root program plants memorial and tribute trees in SBLC nature preserves and Saginaw County and Bay City parks. To ensure a steady supply of high quality, well-adapted tree species, SBLC has developed its own tree nursery.

SBLC also has established three nature preserves in Bay City and one in Saginaw, and holds a total of 49.5 acres of urban land in preserves. The 26-acre Michigan Sugar Trails Preserve is located on the Middle Ground, an island in the middle of the Saginaw River in Bay City. The Michigan Sugar Trails provide opportunities for fishermen, hikers, runners, and birders, and includes the only single-track mountain biking trail in Bay City. The 3-acre Janet H. Nash Riverfront Preserve in Saginaw is a partnership with the

Saginaw Public School District, the City of Saginaw, Saginaw County Parks and Recreation, and others. The site has been planted with thousands of native plants and flowers and provides views along the Saginaw River and connections to the City of Saginaw's riverfront trail system.

SBLC is supported by a staff of seven, its Board of Directors, and countless community members and volunteers. It has an annual operating budget of approximately \$575,000.

Source: Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy



Photo courtesy of Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy

Tools Used by Land Conservancies

Land conservancies use a variety of specialized tools to protect land and create open spaces. Several of these tools rely on the transfer or restriction of property rights. In rural and suburban areas, the use of “fee simple ownership” and conservation easements are among the most common tools. In urban areas, the types of tools used are expanded to include the use of deed restrictions, leases, management agreements, partnerships, and assistance to private landowners. This list is far from exhaustive, and each project brings unique situations. Land conservancies continue to apply creative solutions to land tenure and protection.

FEE SIMPLE OWNERSHIP

Commonly referred to as “direct ownership” or owning a property “free and clear,” fee simple ownership is the term used when a landowner retains full rights and privileges to the land and may use the property in any way they wish within the confines of the law. Fee simple ownership is often the preferred tool in situations where a conservancy wants to have full control over land management decisions, provide access to the public, or create community-managed open space. Fee simple ownership comes with full liability for the land and the responsibility to maintain it. Purchasing land fee simple is generally far more costly than other land protection strategies, both in the short and long term. In addition to potentially having to pay market value for the land, the ongoing cost of maintaining and securing land is greater than other methods.

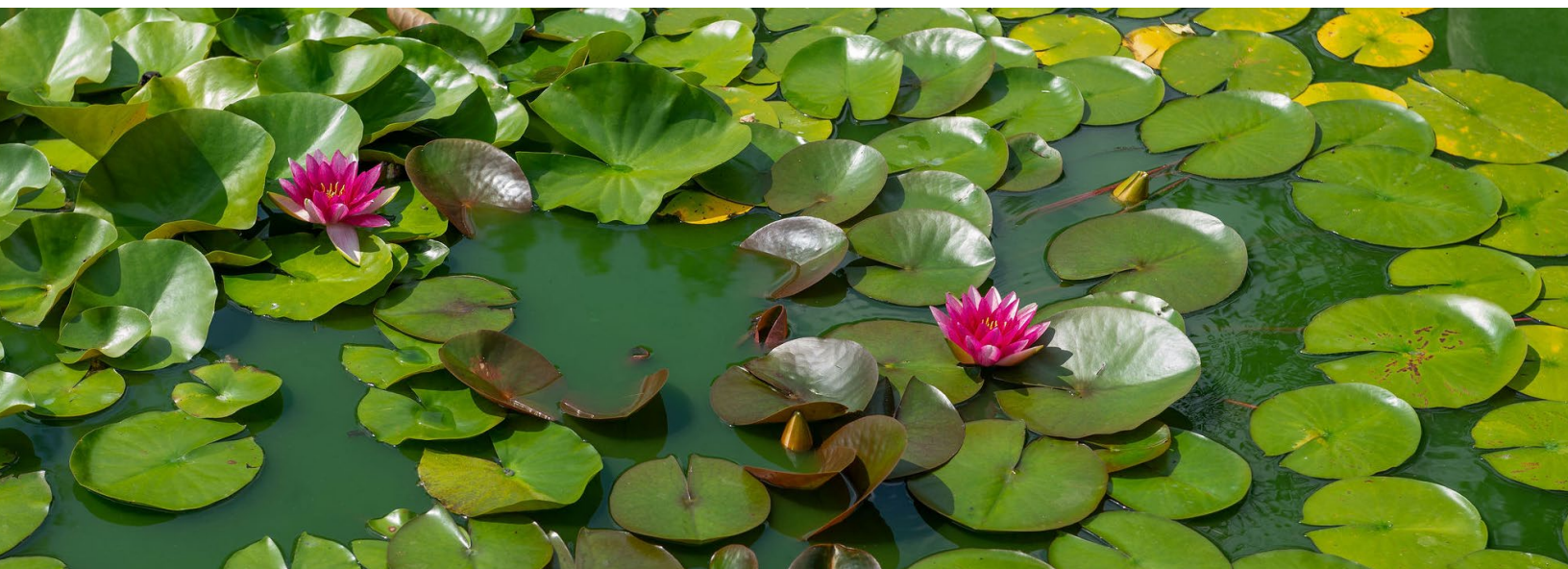


Photo credit: Tafari Stevenson-Howard | Location: Field Temple, Detroit

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

Conservation easements are often placed on farmland, wetlands, forests, and other natural resources. They transfer the legal right to develop land from a property owner to a land conservancy that holds the easement, meaning the legal property ownership does not change. The property owner retains the right to use the property in ways that are consistent with conserving the natural resources of the land, such as fishing, hunting, hiking, farming, and selective logging. Conservation easements can provide high degrees of long-term protection to open space and ensure that natural resources remain for generations to come.

Conservation easements are also less costly for a land conservancy than fee simple ownership, and they do not bear the same responsibilities for liability or upkeep. Conservancies are responsible for ensuring that the easements are not violated and that the land is managed consistently with agreements in place, but have no control over the details of property management. Public access to land held in conservation easements is generally restricted. The combination of low cost and high level of protection makes conservation easements some of the most cost-effective tools for land conservation.

There may be situations in which a conservation easement is purchased by a land conservancy, however, it is more common for the landowner to donate a conservation easement. The use of conservation easements may be desirable to landowners who wish to ensure that their property will not be developed and provides financial benefits to themselves and their heirs. The donation of conservation easements can be used as a tax deduction, property taxes on land with conservation easements are lower, and the assessed property value remains capped when the property is transferred to heirs. Conservation easements remain on the land when the property is sold, and the development restrictions on the property remain in perpetuity.

DEED RESTRICTIONS

Deed restrictions have more limited applications for land conservancies, and do not transfer property rights to another party. Instead, they restrict the landowner's ability to express these rights. A deed restriction could, for example, limit the ability to cut down trees on a property. The right to cut down trees is not transferred, but legally restricted. Deed restrictions do not provide the same level of protection as conservation easements, relying on enforcement by those who wish to see them legally enforced. Deed restrictions are useful in situations in which a land conservancy or landowner is unwilling or unable to place a conservation easement on the land. They provide land protection, but the land conservancy does not bear any responsibility for the upkeep of the land. They also do not provide financial benefits to property owners, and transfer with the sale of the property.

LEASES

Land conservancies may lease land for the development of green space projects on property they do not own. Conversely, land conservancies may lease land they own to individuals, businesses, or organizations for mission-based purposes, such as the development of tree nurseries or urban farms.

MANAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

Management and partnerships agreements are used to support community members in developing and managing property owned by a land conservancy for public assets, such as community gardens. Land conservancies can support community green space through land acquisition, holding, and protection. In addition, conservancies frequently provide limited liability insurance and support for site development and maintenance. Community members often provide site maintenance and programming and ensure that land is used in a way that meets the needs of the community.

PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships between conservancies, municipalities, authorities, and other nonprofits are common. The complexity and resources required to develop large open-space projects often require many collaborators, skill sets, and funding sources.

ASSISTANCE TO PRIVATE LANDOWNERS

Investing in privately held land for projects such as tree planting or rain gardens on private property often furthers the goals of urban conservancies. Specialization in land acquisition provides land conservancies the skills to provide support for land purchases by neighborhood residents for greening efforts.



Photo credit: Tafari Stevenson-Howard | Location: Palmer Park, Detroit

THE FORMATION OF A LAND CONSERVANCY IN DETROIT

Starting in late summer 2023, Detroit Future City (DFC) staff researched, interviewed, and toured land conservancies around the country to understand how a land conservancy could function in Detroit. DFC convened focus groups and discussion meetings with stakeholders to learn more about the types of open space valued and why, priorities for conservation of land, and identification of long-term goals.

Focus group participants provided invaluable recommendations for geography, types of land to focus conservation efforts on, scale, goals, and function of a potential land conservancy. These conversations also included time dedicated to the discussion of values important for land conservation organizations and crucial language to include in a mission statement. Based on feedback from focus groups, DFC has developed a draft **mission statement** to help envision the mission of such an organization in Detroit:



Photo credit: Cydni Elledge, Detroit Design Core | Location: Callahan Park, Detroit

Elements of Land Conservancy in Detroit

The insights shared from focus groups, conversations, interviews, and research were critical to providing guidance in developing a path toward the formation of a land conservancy in Detroit. The following are fundamental elements informed through this process and key to the development of a successful land conservation organization in Detroit.

PURPOSE

A land conservancy in Detroit should work to stabilize communities by reducing vacant land and increasing investment in open space. It should seek to support community vibrancy through replacing the negative impacts of vacant land with improved community safety, health, and recreation, while also creating restorative, beautiful spaces that improve biodiversity and mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

GEOGRAPHY AND LAND TYPE

A land conservancy should serve the entirety of the cities of Detroit, Highland Park, and Hamtramck. It should focus its work on larger projects made up of contiguous parcels and foster the connection of new projects with existing ones to increase the collective impact. If requested, a land conservancy could provide support for existing community open-space stewards.

LAND FUNCTION AND DESIGN

A land conservancy should focus on creating landscapes that cost less to implement and maintain. These designs could include basic amenities, such as signage, benches, and walking trails, but would not provide the same level of amenities found in traditional parks. A land conservancy should work with community members to identify green space opportunities and use a collaborative design process. Though not focused on creating landscapes whose primary function is green stormwater management or vegetative buffering, the land conservancy could provide technical support for these green space projects and incorporate them into natural areas.

STRATEGIES

A land conservancy should use all the conservation tools outlined in this report to provide creative solutions to support green space in Detroit. Because few native natural areas remain in Detroit, the great majority of projects will require the transformation of vacant land into natural areas to reach a land conservancy's goals. Though the primary work of a land conservancy would focus on the creation of new natural areas for protection, there is also a need to protect existing natural features and to support stewards of open space. Support for these stewards could include the holding of land on behalf of the community and providing land management plans and agreements and basic services, such as blanket liability insurance and property tax management.

PARTNERSHIPS

A land conservancy in Detroit should build on and complement the existing work of others to support open space in Detroit. A land conservancy should identify existing gaps and shore up weaknesses in the existing open space landscape, rather than replicate others' work. Garnering support for a land conservancy from existing open space users and building formal partnerships will be key to the conservancy's success. Success will require working with critical players in city government, such as the Office of Sustainability and the Parks and Recreation and Planning and Development departments. As the largest holder of vacant land, a working relationship with the Detroit Land Bank Authority will also be crucial.

REGIONAL CONNECTIONS

Detroit's open spaces will be stronger when integrated into the entire region. A land conservancy should work with other conservation organizations in Southeast Michigan and Southwestern Ontario, as well as with the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG). This will result in a deeper impact by identifying connections to regional natural resources and opportunities for collective action.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY

A land conservancy should advocate for additional funding and resources to support open space and for the inclusion of open space in zoning documents and as a crucial component of an updated City Master Plan of Policies. A land conservancy should support establishing policies to protect and encourage open space.

BUILDING ON DECADES OF WORK

Some of the notable organizations and programs that have supported green space development in Detroit include the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund, which has facilitated the sale of 18.7 acres of vacant Detroit Land Bank Authority property to Black farmers.^{xlvii} The nonprofit gardening organization Keep Growing Detroit supports 2,283 farms and gardens, many on former vacant lots.^{xlviii} Detroit Future City has supported more than 50 community groups to develop neighborhood green space through its Working With Lots Program.^{xlix} The City of Detroit's Neighborhood Beautification Program has awarded more than \$2 million in grants to 157 neighborhood organizations in support of community green space projects.ⁱ With the completion of the Joe Louis Greenway, unused, neglected, and overgrown railways and industrial land will be turned into a 27.5-mile greenway that connects parks and neighborhoods across across Detroit, Highland Park, Hamtramck, and Dearborn.ⁱⁱ



Photo credit: Garrett MacLean | Location: Circle Forest, Detroit

CASE STUDY

Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Northeast Ohio: Partnerships for Urban Conservation

Western Reserve Land Conservancy is a 501(c)3 land conservancy founded in 2006, when 13 organizations merged to become one of the nation's largest land conservancies. It protects 76,519 acres in 29 counties in Northeast Ohio. The majority of Western Reserve's work has been to preserve land in rural areas, but it also has a significant impact on open space in Cleveland, having developed dozens of projects in the most urbanized areas in the state.

In 2011, Western Reserve established the Thriving Communities program to revitalize neighborhoods in Cleveland that have been historically marginalized and discriminated against. Its comprehensive approach focuses on the development of open space and the stabilization of housing. Through this program, it has created 12 public green spaces, facilitated the transfer of 139 vacant lots to residents for side lots, and transformed 70 vacant parcels by cleaning up illegal dumping and planting trees and other native vegetation. Western Reserve has partnered with the Cuyahoga County Land Bank to support the renovation of homes and the demolition of unsafe structures in neighborhoods it works within.

In addition, its Reforest Our City program has planted and distributed more than 15,000 trees and trained some 300 tree stewards. Beyond the smaller green spaces developed through the Thriving Communities program, Western Reserve has also worked to create larger open-space projects. In partnership with Cleveland Metroparks and the Old Brooklyn Development Corporation, it transformed a former landfill into the 25-acre Brighton Park. The organization is working to develop the 28-acre Euclid Beach property on Lake Erie to provide important community access to the lake and green space.

Recently, Western Reserve has spearheaded the development of the Cleveland Vacant Land Opportunity Tool (CLEVLOT) to develop ways to make vacant land resources in Cleveland easier to access. Outcomes of the CLEVLOT program include improvements to land searches and the application process for the Cleveland Land Bank, mapping of existing green-space sites, and a directory of resources for open-space stewards.

Western Reserve uses a number of tools and strategies to create and protect open space, including facilitating private ownership by community members, management agreements, partnerships, deed restrictions, easements, and direct ownership. Its work in Cleveland is supported by a staff of nine and a yearly budget of approximately \$1.5 million. Western Reserve's Cleveland staff is further supported by the much larger staff of the entire Western Reserve Land Conservancy.

Source: Western Reserve Land Conservancy



Photo courtesy of Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Cleveland



Photo credit: Cydni Elledge, Detroit Design Core | Location: Callahan Park, Detroit

A PATH FORWARD

Detroit Future City is committed to continuing to shepherd the formation of a successful land conservancy in Detroit. The elements identified in focus groups have formed the basis for a path forward. DFC staff and advisors have built upon this and identified additional steps required to successfully navigate the formation of a conservancy. The following are but a few of the many evolving tasks ahead:



Conduct community engagement

Community engagement will be crucial during all phases of a land conservancy's lifespan. During formation, it will be vital in shaping the organization to best serve the needs of Detroiters and their communities. Initial community engagement should provide general education on the concept of a land conservancy, how it functions, and the benefits that such an organization can provide community members. Engagement will build support for a land conservancy, help to identify partners, and identify locations where there is a desire for land protection and the development of green space.



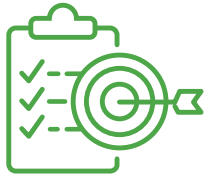
Determine appropriate project size and scale

A land conservancy should develop best practices for the size and scale of land conservation projects based on neighborhood attributes. The appropriate size of a project will be dictated by existing vacant land, density, and community need and desire. In denser neighborhoods, small projects may have big impacts; in more open areas, large projects may be necessary to make similar impacts.



Develop conservation criteria for protection

Land conservancies have limited resources and must make difficult decisions to decide the protection criteria that will determine which land they prioritize for protection. Examples of criteria that conservancies may use include the existence of endangered or threatened species, notable historical and cultural locations, community impact, location and size of the parcels, and the vulnerability to development.



Identify goals for scale of city-wide conservation

Rural conservancies often protect hundreds of acres of land, while the impact of existing urban conservancies is more often measured in the tens of acres. The complexity and intensity of management in urban areas demands greater resources on smaller sites, yet these smaller acreages can have a greater impact for urban communities than their rural counterparts. A land conservancy in Detroit should identify the scale of land transformation and protection that will make the desired impact.



Identify possible locations

Not all locations are appropriate or desirable for conservation projects. Locations for conservation should be identified and considered through a combination of factors, including land availability, land protection criteria, community support, and opportunity for positive impacts on the community. The actual number of sites that meet all conditions needed for conservation will be considerably smaller than the full inventory of Detroit's vacant land.



Identify cost and funding

A land conservancy will need to identify the long-term costs for land protection, transformation, stewardship, and management. Funding opportunities that can match these needs and align with the conservancy's goals will need to be identified. The land conservancies' commitment to long-term protection of land requires a particularly forward-thinking approach to funding, and opportunities to develop endowments must be explored. The goals of the scale of land management will also need to be balanced with long-term funding opportunities.

Developing a successful land conservancy in Detroit will not require the above tasks to be fully completed before formation, but they will need to at least be considered. These recommendations are based on present knowledge, and as we continue to listen and learn, these recommendations may need to adapt and change. Many of the land conservancies studied in other communities have taken an iterative, responsive approach to their development, staying true to their vision while remaining open to varying strategies based on community need and changing conditions. Land conservancies are still at the vanguard of conservation work in urban areas, and, because the model is untried in Detroit, the path will need to be built as we walk upon it.

A VISION FOR OPEN SPACE AND LAND CONSERVATION IN DETROIT

Detroit's vast amount of vacant property presents a stunning possibility few cities have been afforded. It offers an opportunity to take another course, a path not to what has been, but to what can be. Detroit has a chance to build a city full of healthy, vibrant, and resilient neighborhoods and to serve as a model on how open space can be meaningfully woven into the urban fabric.

When this opportunity is actualized, Detroit will be a city where everyone can find a calming respite within a natural space, surrounded by the beauty of birds, butterflies, and flowers. It will be a city where all people, young and old, feel safe to walk, exercise, dance, and commune. It will be a city that mitigates and adapts to the impacts of climate change and literally weathers the storms.

A conservancy's unique tools and skills will be invaluable to the implementation of bold creative solutions needed for this vision to come to life. The vision cannot be wrought by a land conservancy alone; it will require a concerted effort in partnership with the City, the DLBA, community development groups, nonprofits, and most of all, city residents. A land conservancy is a big part of this puzzle, a missing piece that can join the others together.

Bold ideas and dreams for our neighborhoods are already here, shaped in the minds of Detroiters every day and heard from elders on porch steps and children on playgrounds. It is up to us to believe in these ideas and dreams, support them, tend to them, protect them, and watch them bloom.



Photo credit: Detroit Future City | Location: Land Conservancy Stakeholder Engagement Session at Tech Town, Detroit

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