

Mid-Michigan Land Conservancy

Annual Report–2017

Mission

The mission of Mid-Michigan Land Conservancy (MMLC) is to conserve natural land and farmland in mid-Michigan and to promote the preservation of such lands. MMLC does this by: (i) assisting landowners in placing conservation easements on natural land and farmland, (ii) acquiring selected larger parcels outright and maintaining them as natural areas open to the public, and (iii) informing people of the importance of preserving natural land and farmland. Our area of coverage is Ionia, Clinton, Shiawassee, Eaton, Ingham, Jackson, and Hillsdale counties. MMLC is a qualified land conservancy recognized by the State of Michigan and the Internal Revenue Service and is covered by Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. It is qualified to receive donations of conservation easements on land, donations of land, monetary donations, and other donations. Donors can use these donations as deductions when determining their federal and state income taxes, to the extent allowed by law.

Land Activities

As of the end of 2017, MMLC had 2,117 acres under protection through 18 conservation easements (1,783 acres) and 5 fee properties (334 acres). The approximate location and descriptions of these properties are on our website, www.midmilandcons.org. All properties that MMLC owns outright are kept as natural areas, and all have Property Stewards. In 2017 one (1) new conservation easement and one (1) new fee property were added to the lands MMLC protects.

In 2017, one of our goals was to increase the amount of native prairie habitat on Bunker Nature Preserve (BNP). BNP is our 130-acre preserve in Ingham County near Mason. Since European settlement began, native prairie habitat has become an increasingly rare type of habitat in Michigan. Putting in native prairie is most effectively done as a multi-year process with most of the work done in the first three years. In 2015 we contracted with a local farmer to begin a two-year process of planting first corn and then soybeans on 40 acres of BNP that was fallow land. A 2-year farming cycle of this kind reduces the weed content of the land and this greatly increases the possibility of successfully establishing a prairie with native plants. In spring of the third year, 2017, the 40 acres were planted with native prairie grasses and forbs. We worked closely with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service on this restoration project and they provided financial support. The germination and growth of the native prairie plants proceeded nicely. Generally it takes approximately three years from time of planting for a native prairie to become firmly established, however, the development after one year already looks promising.

An approximately 25-acre prairie was already established on the BNP when MMLC acquired the property. It was planted by the previous owner. For a native prairie to thrive it needs to be burned periodically, otherwise it is overgrown through succession by shrubs and trees and lost. A professional crew burned this prairie in March 2017. The prairie responded beautifully. It grew vigorously following the burn with the forbs being particularly attractive this summer.

A marked trail system is present on the BNP. The system will be extended into the new prairie in the next few years. Three benches have been strategically placed on the trails. The benches are the result of an eagle project carried out by a boy scout from one of the Mason scout troops. Increasingly bird watchers are drawn to the BNP because the varied habitats of the land attract a great variety of birds. We encourage the public to visit this natural area. An off-road parking lot is available for visitors.

MMLC owns a second natural area in Ingham County, Iosco Natural Area. It is a 75-acre parcel near Dansville. A trail through the property has largely been constructed. We plan to complete the trail in 2018. This natural area is open to the public from January 2 to September 14 of each year. The remainder of the year the parcel is open only to certified hunters. The hunting agreement was a condition of the donation of the property.

A third natural area, Ionia Natural Area, is located mainly in the City of Ionia. The 120-acre property is largely in the flood plain of the Grand River and has about a half mile of frontage on the river. The property is about two-thirds wooded; the other third being farm fields. The farmer decided to stop farming in 2016. He had been doing a corn–soybean cycle and had just ended with soybeans. This was a perfect time to plant a native prairie and this was done with the help of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Native grasses and forbs were planted on the fields in Spring 2017. This prairie also grew well in its first growing season.

The Fred Meijer Grand River Valley Rail Trail runs along the north boundary of the property and the Fred Thwaites Grand River Trail traverses the southern part. Great views of the property are visible from both of trails. There are very attractive views of the Grand River from the latter trail. Walking and bicycling on these trails are excellent ways to visit this property.

In 2017 we worked with three (3) landowners who wanted to protect their land with conservation easements and one (1) who wanted to donate a parcel outright to MMLC. The properties are in Ionia, Eaton, and Hillsdale counties. The conservation easement for the property in Eaton County and the donation of the parcel in Hillsdale County were completed in 2017. Work on the others is continuing.

The new fee property we acquired in 2017 is approximately 7.7 acres and is located immediately south of Hillsdale in Hillsdale County. It is fully wooded and has approximately 1,000 feet of frontage on Fourth (Bass) Lake. It also has considerable frontage on Highway 99, so it is readily visible from a road for people to enjoy. It's a biologically-rich property, particularly with respect to trees and shrubs. Not only are numerous Michigan species on the parcel, but also more southern species are present.

All properties we protect, including those we own outright, are monitored by MMLC Board members. All landowners are following the provisions of their conservation easements. Typically, these properties are monitored approximately once a year.

Organizational Activities in 2017

The board completed an extensive handbook for the organization that will guide our operations. The document, *Handbook of Operations for Mid-Michigan Land Conservancy*, was approved on June 21, 2017.

A 5-year MMLC Strategic Plan 2017-21 was completed in 2017 and approved March 2017. The emphases of the plan are on funding and acquiring permanent staff. Two board members are taking the lead on implementing the plan.

The board applied for and received a grant of \$4,000 from Freshwater Future in June 2017. The funds were awarded to assist MMLC with developing a fund raising plan. Two board members are taking the lead on developing the fund raising plan, with assistance from personnel from Freshwater Future.

MMLC was accepted into the pre-accreditation and accreditation processes run by Land Trust Alliance. These processes are designed to lead to the national accreditation of MMLC as a land trust. The deadlines for submission of the applications are June 21, 2018 and September 13, 2018, respectively. Two board members are taking the lead in preparing these applications.

MMLC received a grant of \$3,635 from Land Trust Alliance in 2017 to extend a 2016 grant given for assistance in preparing the pre-accreditation and accreditation applications. An outside contractor has been engaged for this assistance.

A boy scout from a troop based in Mason largely completed his eagle project on the BNP in 2017.

MMLC Newsletter #5 was published and mailed to approximately 225 people in September 2017. Distribution of the newsletter is continuing.

Annual Report–2017 (this report) and *Annual Plan–2018* were prepared.

Our website was kept current.

Annual Plan–2018

The board developed *Annual Plan–2018*. It will guide our activities in 2018. In 2018 we plan to: (i) continue implementing our Five-year Strategic Plan 2017-21, particularly raising funds and acquiring staff, (ii) complete and implement our fund raising plan, (iii) complete both the pre-accreditation and accreditation applications to Land Trust Alliance, (iv) develop a presence on social media, (v) respond to all inquiries for

placing conservation easements on land and to all offers for donations of land, (vi) prepare conservation easements and baseline documents for landowners who want to protect their land with a conservation easement, (vii) publish our next newsletter, (viii) monitor the properties we protect, and (ix) prepare our *Annual Report–2018* and *Annual Plan–2019*.

Financial Statement

MMLC had a positive financial balance at the end of 2017 and did not have any liabilities. Revenues from contributors and grants have been adequate to accomplish the work MMLC undertook in 2017. Federal and state tax documents were completed. For more detailed information, contact Paul Kindel.

Information on Tax Benefits for Landowners Who Are Considering Protecting Their Land with a Conservation Easement. Reminders.

In 2015 the enhanced federal tax benefit for the donation of a conservation easement to a qualified land conservancy was made permanent. This benefit particularly helps landowners of more modest incomes. Additional information on this tax benefit can be obtained at www.lta.org. Also made permanent is legislation that allows individuals to make charitable gifts from their traditional IRA accounts without incurring federal income tax on the withdrawals. For advice on these and other tax issues, consult your tax advisor.

Michigan legislation eliminated the “pop-up” of property tax on land covered by a conservation easement when ownership of the land is transferred, for example, sold. The taxable value the land had before the transfer (sale) occurs is retained by the new owner after the transfer occurs. This makes land covered by a conservation easement attractive to new owners since the property tax for the new owner should not increase significantly, if at all, on transfer. The exemption does not apply to buildings or other structures.

Affiliations

MMLC is a member of the Land Trust Alliance, a national land protection advocacy organization for land conservancies (trusts) in the United States. MMLC is also a member of Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy, a state land protection advocacy organization for Michigan land conservancies.

Meetings and Website

The MMLC Board meets approximately seven times a year. The meetings are open to the public. If you would like to attend a meeting(s), contact Paul Kindel. Contact information is below and on our website, which is given above. Additional information about MMLC is also on our website.

Board of Directors

We are pleased to have Elizabeth Connors join the MMLC Board in 2017. The members of the Board in 2017 were: Stephen Buzby, Elizabeth Connors, Eckhart Dersch, Janelle Hermes, Paul Kindel, Michael Rhodes, Ken Rosenman, Edward Schools, and Robert Zbiciak. Officers in 2017 were: Paul Kindel (President), Edward Schools (Vice-president), Ken Rosenman (Secretary), and Stephen Buzby/Elizabeth Connors (Treasurer). Board members and officers serve 3- and 1-year terms, respectively.

We are pleased to announce that Meghan Stevens joined the Board on January 17, 2018

Protection of Land

We are glad to speak with landowners individually who would like information on the benefits of protecting their land, including the tax benefits or give presentations to groups on this topic. Feel free to contact Paul Kindel by e-mail (kindel@msu.edu), telephone (517-332-3091), or postal mail (2915 Margate Lane, East Lansing, MI 48823) to arrange these.

Paul K. Kindel, President,
Mid-Michigan Land Conservancy,
On behalf of the Board of Directors
East Lansing, Michigan, February 24, 2018