



## news release

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Long-Awaited Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area Project Successfully Concluded

**Saugatuck, Mich.** — The City of Saugatuck and the Land Conservancy of West Michigan announce that after years of negotiations, planning, and fundraising, the final two-thirds of the 173-acre Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area was successfully transferred into City ownership today.

The Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area's expanse of rolling, open dunes, wetlands, and woods is now protected and open to the public for non-motorized recreational use as an addition to the City's award-winning Oval Beach park. Parking is available at Oval Beach City Park and there is a marked trail system through the open dunes.

"Efforts to protect this natural area began over 50 years ago," said City Manager Kirk Harrier. "Saugatuck citizens made it clear that preserving the land between Oval Beach City Park and the Kalamazoo River channel was important to the community for many reasons."

On December 22, 2009, the Land Conservancy of West Michigan, working in partnership with the City of Saugatuck, The Nature Conservancy, and a group of lead donors and lenders including the Frey Foundation, Fred & Lena Meijer, the Brooks family, Todd & Liz Warnock, the J.A. Woollam Foundation, the Pleasant T. Rowland Foundation and the Conservation Fund, purchased the Lake Michigan property from Aubrey McClendon for \$19 million.

This purchase followed a commitment from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) to provide \$10.5 million, or roughly half of the projected project cost, over three years. Shortly after the purchase, the City learned that its application for a \$3 million grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program was successful.

"Lead donations and loans made it possible for the Land Conservancy to take the property out of consideration for development and hold it while the City's grants were processed

and the Land Conservancy's fundraising for matching private funds was completed," said Brian Obits, Interim Executive Director for the Land Conservancy.

Nearly 900 families and individuals contributed financially to this project. The fundraising was accelerated when in December 2010 the MNRTF decided to make both the second and third year payout available in 2011. Since its purchase the Land Conservancy has leased the property to the City of Saugatuck for \$1 a year, which has allowed the public to enjoy the property throughout the transaction process.

"This is a true example of a community working together to protect our region's treasured natural areas," said Obits. "Community involvement and federal and state grants have made a positive impact on the Lake Michigan region, and area residents are encouraged to visit this unique duneland property that is now City parkland."

As part of the private fundraising, the City of Saugatuck will receive an endowment fund for the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area. This endowment will ensure that the property will be preserved and maintained for future generations.

The Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area dune ecosystem includes an amazing diversity of habitats and resources: 3,650 feet of Lake Michigan shoreline, populations of at least 6 rare plant and animal species including the prairie warbler (state endangered status) and Blanchard's cricket frog (state threatened), open dunes, interdunal wetlands, natural jack pine forest, hardwood-pine dune forest, Great Lakes marsh, 4,452 feet on an oxbow lake, 1,650 feet of Kalamazoo River shoreline, and a historic site known as "Fishtown."

The Land Conservancy of West Michigan invites the public to a guided hike at the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area on Saturday, December 31 at 10:00 a.m. Hikers should meet at the north end of Oval Beach parking lot. For more information visit [www.naturenearby.org](http://www.naturenearby.org).

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*The Land Conservancy of West Michigan is a nonprofit organization that preserves natural land and open space in eight West Michigan counties. It is the only organization devoted solely to preserving natural and scenic lands that are an important part of West Michigan's community character. With over thirty-five years of experience keeping nature nearby, the Land Conservancy has protected over 7,400 acres with nature preserves, conservation easements, and project assistance to local governments.*

Photos:

Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area in November 2011

Credit: Andrew Topper



Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area summer shoreline

Credit: Ted Swoboda



Saugatuck Mayor Jane Verplank (middle) and Saugatuck Clerk Monica Looman (right) sign documents on Monday, December 19, 2011 to transfer the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area into City ownership while City Manager Kirk Harrier looks on (left)

Credit: Michelle Harris, Land Conservancy of West Michigan

