

Final Report

Land Acquisition Planning for Lower Fox River Conservation Opportunity Area

(aka: Lower Fox River Land Conservation Planning Project – LFR LCPP)

The Conservation Foundation

August 16, 2011 – July 31, 2012

Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation Grant (ID #5492)

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I. Project History

The lower Fox River basin contains some of the most beautiful and significant segments of the river from high limestone bluffs to wetlands, seeps and fens, along with the attributes of its many tributaries. The 36 miles from Yorkville to Ottawa have been described as one of the most physiographically and botanically interesting areas in the state. (IL Dept. of Natural Resources, Native Habitat Inventory of the Lower Fox River, 1999)

The environmental features in this region and other reasons have enticed a rapidly increasing number of people to reside in the Lower Fox River area, especially over the past decade. Kendall County was the fastest growing county in the country in the 2000's. Such rapid population increases can put pressure on the viability and quality of many of the river basin's resources, if protection is not planned adequately.

As stated in the Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, much of the state's natural habitat areas have been lost over the generations, which can cause environmental decline and economic losses. Protection of such areas can protect habitat for flora and fauna, provide open space for aesthetic and natural area protection, provide economic and environmental enhancements to communities, provide possible tax incentives for property owners, and provide the ultimate "tax cap" for residents by reducing an ever-increasing demand on community services.

Both Kendall and LaSalle Counties, along with many of the local municipalities, have protection of natural areas and open space as a goal in their comprehensive land use plans, especially protection of river areas. The Lower Fox COA plan is the first to assimilate these efforts into one plan.

The Illinois Wildlife Action Plan, adopted in 2005, identified 31 Conservation Opportunity Areas (COA) in the state to help address the issue of diminishing natural resources. They were identified as priority areas for conserving Illinois' species in greatest need of conservation. COA's represent geographic areas across political boundary lines that are in the greatest need of conservation of various flora and fauna species. A COA is defined as an area with wildlife and habitat of statewide importance, local partners willing to be involved, available financial and human resources, and an agreed upon conservation purpose and set of objectives. Boundaries were developed based on the presence of important habitats for fish and wildlife resources, as well as stakeholder input. The Lower Fox River was identified as one of the COAs and is located within Kendall and LaSalle Counties.

In March, 2011, The Conservation Foundation (TCF) applied to the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation for grant funds to facilitate a land preservation planning process in the Lower Fox River COA. The project was intended to collaboratively identify and prioritize high quality natural resource properties for preservation within the COA.

The outcome products as indicated in the grant application included: prioritized list of land sites to be preserved, the responsible party(s), funding sources and needs, and an interactive GIS based map on a website for future use by stakeholders.

The planning project was conducted from August, 2011 through July, 2012.

II. Project Narrative (based on IL Clean Energy Foundation letter of May 2, 2011)

a. Accomplishments

1. Recruiting and Involving Stakeholders Committee and other Support

A Stakeholders' Committee of 35 members was involved in the process from October, 2011 via e-mail, office visits and planning committee meetings. Introductory meetings were held in each county in October, 2011. Planning meetings were conducted from November, 2011 through July, 2012 to identify goals, determine a mission statement, identify priority criteria, etc. Stakeholders represented local and state government agencies, landowners, agricultural and conservation groups, businesses, and interested individuals from Kendall and LaSalle Counties. In addition, approximately an additional 50 interested individuals were contacted as potential participants and kept

informed of the committee efforts.

Stakeholder identification and solicitation was a process led by TCF staff with input from key leaders in the project area, including elected officials, agency staff and others. As part of that process to gather input and share information about the project, TCF staff met with or talked with the Mayors and Village Presidents of nine of the eleven cities/villages in the COA, a State Representative and a State Senator serving the majority of the area, Kendall County Forest Preserve President, LaSalle and Kendall County Board Chair's staff.

In addition to the Stakeholders Planning Committee, a Technical Advisory Committee comprised of state and local agency staff reviewed existing protected areas and others with future potential. This information was incorporated into the working map and shared with the Stakeholder Committee

Other types of technical support was received from GIS, planning and parcel mapping staff in Kendall and LaSalle Counties and appropriate municipalities regarding available maps of open space and related natural resource areas, parcel maps, etc. In addition, TCF staff met with Teska & Assoc. staff, land planning consultants for Kendall County, and received the electronic files for their Fox River Corridor land use planning study area. In addition, Christopher B. Burke Engineering, Ltd. (CBBEL), providing both paid and in-kind services, developed the working and final GIS map files for use by the committee and TCF staff.

2. Documents for Public Distribution

- TCF staff developed a 3-page LFR LCPP fact sheet in a Q&A format to use in discussions with community leaders, stakeholders and the general public.
- Tri-fold informational brochure about the project, its purpose and process and funders developed by TCF staff
- Final project-end brochure with project information and COA planning map was developed by TCF staff with input from the stakeholders committee.
- Also, IDNR staff wrote and presented to the committee a *Summary of Fish Sampling for the Lower Fox River Land Conservation Planning Project*, which can also be used with leaders and public in conjunction with other materials.
- Also utilized as part of the planning process with local leaders and committee members was the summary of the *Native Habitat Inventory of the Lower Fox River, 1999, IDNR*.

3. Prioritized Parcel List (see appendix for list, maps and prioritization criteria)

Through the use of existing agency, municipal, and county documents, a GIS based working map was developed as part of the in-kind mapping services by TCF staff and technical support staff. Various versions of that map were shared with the Stakeholder Planning Committee and Technical Advisory Committee to review and discuss for omissions, deletions, additions, prioritization, etc. until a final parcel map was accepted by the committee. A list of parcels, along with ownership information, possible responsible parties and funding strategies, was created from the final map. The parcel list and parcel map are available for use with stakeholders by individual request. The merged parcel map itself is available to the public via the website and final brochure.

The prioritized parcel list includes 14 sites in Kendall County consisting of approximately 1400 total acres and includes 13 sites in LaSalle County consisting of approximately 2000 acres. Acreages are approximate because sites are made up of multiple parcels. Some larger/multiple-parcel sites may not necessarily need to be considered in entirety for proper protection and some parcels may be quite small in nature to determine acreage accurately.

4. Website

As per the initial project work product list, a GIS based map has been provided for public view on a website at www.theconservationfoundation.org/lower-fox-land-planning.html. This map for public use merges the various parcels into broader planning categories. A GIS based planning map, as developed with partner input and stakeholder committee approval of individual parcels, is available to stakeholders by request from The Conservation Foundation and can be updated as parcels change in status.

b. Mistakes and Successes

Several pertinent points related to this issue were also covered in Interim Reports A & B and are repeated below:

What are the biggest challenges that the project faces in leading to actual land acquisitions sooner rather than later after completion? There are three main challenges to actual land acquisition from the project effort, including:

- Lack of available public partners in parts of the LaSalle County portion of COA for acquisition and/or long-term management
- Lack of funds for public acquisition and/or to educate and pursue preservation options for private lands.
- Current economic conditions have reduced incentives for selling land for public ownership and/or private land preservation measures.

Have there been any surprises in the project?

Although there have been no unmanageable surprises, some might include:

- a. The complexity and required time of converting the committee's input into a useable mapping format.
- b. The lack of existing compatible data bases accessible across various levels of government.
- c. The lack of existing open space planning by some local entities
- d. The excellent open space planning process of other local entities

Mistakes (as per Final Report request) - specifically to address the Final Report's request to identify mistakes, there may be two that are somewhat related and both deal with time and budget:

Now, after the fact, it is easier to identify such issues than it was for those making the projections at the time of the application. Due to the project taking one month longer than expected, more time and funds should have been allocated in the initial budget for staff. Had the original time allotment been higher, a

project extension may have been avoided and corresponding increase in salaries would have been accounted for initially.

It is difficult to actually identify this as a “mistake” because the resulting help was very good, but having in-house GIS mapping ability may have made the project somewhat easier to accomplish simply based on logistics. However, the excellent final product, the helpful expertise, and the contribution of in-kind services by our contractor outweigh any issues with using outside services.

Successes – Also, as stated in previous interim reports, in terms of items we have been most pleased with: The input and interest provided by the members of the Stakeholders Committee, the Technical Advisory Committee, associated individuals not able to attend meetings and the local entities in the LFR COA area has been very gratifying and a real asset to the project.

As per the Final Report request for things that worked well:

The comments from the interim reports about the function of the committees would be high on that list. Other aspects that worked well were the in-house ability to design and post the website and to develop and publish brochures.

In addition, a strong aspect or success was working with local governmental entities that can provide technological support to obtain parcel information and mapping on-line vs. entities that do not have that capability (which took more time and with less resulting information).

The ability to have easy access to technology regarding mapping, on-line parcel data and the in-house expertise to take advantage of that access to technology was critical to the success of this project.

c. Parcel Information (see appendix) and Dissemination

As per the section on accomplishments, through the use of existing documents, a GIS based working map of parcels was developed. Various versions of that map were shared with the Stakeholders Planning Committee and Technical Advisory Committee to review and discuss for omissions, deletions, additions, prioritization, etc. The committee members provided the input for changes at each meeting until a final parcel map was determined. The final map and parcel list was reviewed by the committee at the July, 2012 meeting.

The interactive individual parcel map and list are available from TCF for use with stakeholders by individual request. The merged parcel map is available to the public via the website and final brochure.

III. Budget (see appendix)

The actual budget report form is included in the appendix, but in regards to the final details of the budget, it should be noted that one of the highlights is that the final stakeholder time was actually twice the original allocated amount, due to the support and time of the committee members. Also, there was a significant amount of in-kind

services donated above the budgeted amount for consultant services, which was a great asset to the project.

The actual total expenses were \$2,372.94 over the budgeted amount. This amount includes overages for staff time, postage, and copy expenses. It also includes a less than budgeted amount for mileage expense.

IV. Planning Partners

As identified in the grant application, the project included the following partners:

- Illinois Department of Natural Resources
- Kendall County Forest Preserve
- Oswegoland Park District
- Friends of the Fox River
- Christopher B. Burke Engineering Ltd.

In addition to the partners listed above, local municipalities, townships and counties were instrumental in providing information for the project. Other partners were the numerous active members of the Stakeholders Committee such as local individuals, Farm Bureau, Master Gardeners, The Wetlands Initiative and Soil and Water Conservation District representatives. The Newark Fire Department also provided meeting space throughout the process.

V. Project Conclusion and Follow-up

Now the planning phase of the project is completed, TCF staff will continue to work with the Stakeholders Committee, counties and municipalities, and other groups to implement the plan:

A sample “Resolution of Support” has been shared with the Kendall County Mayors and Managers group and Kendall County officials at their September meeting. Similar efforts will be made with the other municipalities in the COA. (See appendix for copy of resolution.)

The prioritized list of parcels will be used to begin to make landowner contacts to gauge interest in protection alternatives. Several sites have already been reviewed for potential protection.

The Stakeholders Committee will be updated as to activities and progress being made in the coming months and longer.