

14. Greenbelt

In 2003, Ann Arbor, Michigan, voters approved a 30-year property tax increase to preserve open space and farmland at the city's periphery, which includes land both in the city and in the surrounding townships. The tax increase funding the Greenbelt Program was expected to generate \$84 million over 30 years. By 2007, the program had preserved 703 acres at the cost of \$11.26 million.

The promises of greenbelt advocates are attractive, although it is still too early to tell whether they have merit. More parkland and an end to "urban sprawl" top the list. With growth focused inside the greenbelt, the argument goes, employment will rise to a level that can efficiently support mass transit, thereby reducing many environmental threats from air pollution to road congestion. Higher densities, claim supporters, encourage walking and bicycling rather than driving.

Greenbelt detractors, on the other hand, have grave concerns about the equity of the program. They argue that reducing the acreage of land available for residential development will negatively affect the inventory of affordable housing in an area already notorious for its high housing costs. "Anything that increases the value of real property is great if you already have a piece of the pie," one citizen complained at a public forum on the progress of the Greenbelt Program. She was particularly concerned because the greenbelt will mainly abut high-income areas of the city, making already highly desirable properties even more valuable. The greatest benefits accrue to the few, while many pay the costs. "Same old story. The rich get richer."

Pittsfield Township, a city on Ann Arbor's southern boundary with parts included in the greenbelt plan, long time resident Isadore Freeman is concerned by the inequity of curtailing commercial and industrial growth at the periphery just when that growth was crossing into Pittsfield. "We have been waiting years to benefit from that growth! The elitists across Ellsworth Road don't care a nickel about us. They only want our land to ensure it remains idle." Pittsfield Township, especially when compared with Ann Arbor, survives on meager means. The growth of its tax base has not kept up with its need for services, and, for the most part, Pittsfield residents must travel some distance for employment. "Just when we expected to have money to fix our roads, they shut off the tap. How fair is that?"

People living in Ann Arbor contend that the city plans to purchase property and development rights for the greenbelt only on the open market. An unnamed source in the city administration explained that if Wal-Mart wants a parcel that is designated as part of the greenbelt, it could outbid the city for the land. Governments, however, are apt to change their strategy should the acquisition of land and development rights become troublesome. Landowners in the greenbelt path must weigh whether to sell to Ann Arbor or risk having their properties taken under eminent domain for less money. Developers interested in land programmed for the greenbelt would similarly want to avoid buying any property that the city later might seize. Other landowners outside of Ann Arbor have similar fears since the state also has powers of eminent domain, which it could use or grant to other organizations. Even without the threat of eminent domain, though, few developers are able to compete with the purchasing power of Ann Arbor's program.

It is no longer just the purchasing power of Ann Arbor taxpayers that opponents of the greenbelt must face, but also the dollars from their own pocketbooks paid in taxes. Recently, the US Department of Agriculture anted up \$335,000 from its Farm and Ranchland Protection Program to subsidize the Greenbelt Program.