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Freedom Township Takes First Steps Toward Shaping Future Development to Protect Watershed

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Participants of the Jan. 9, 2016 meeting looking at the map of Freedom Township. Photo courtesy of Lon Nordeen

When we think of “the river” in the Manchester Area, many of us think of the Raisin River, which is natural as it runs through the Village on its way to Lake Erie. But, much of Sharon and Freedom Township actually belongs to the Huron River Watershed. In fact, Pleasant Lake and Freedom Township sit at the head waters of Mill Creek, which feeds directly into the Huron River.

Parking lots and other paved surfaces that come along with development of rural areas increase runoff into the waterways. The runoff eventually ends up in the lakes and rivers, causing multiple environmental problems including warmer temperatures, drought and flood conditions, sedimentation, and pollution.

Because 40% of Freedom’s Township’s current open space is projected to be developed in the next 20 years, Freedom Township officials, residents, and other area stakeholders attended a presentation and planning session last month led by Kris Olsson,

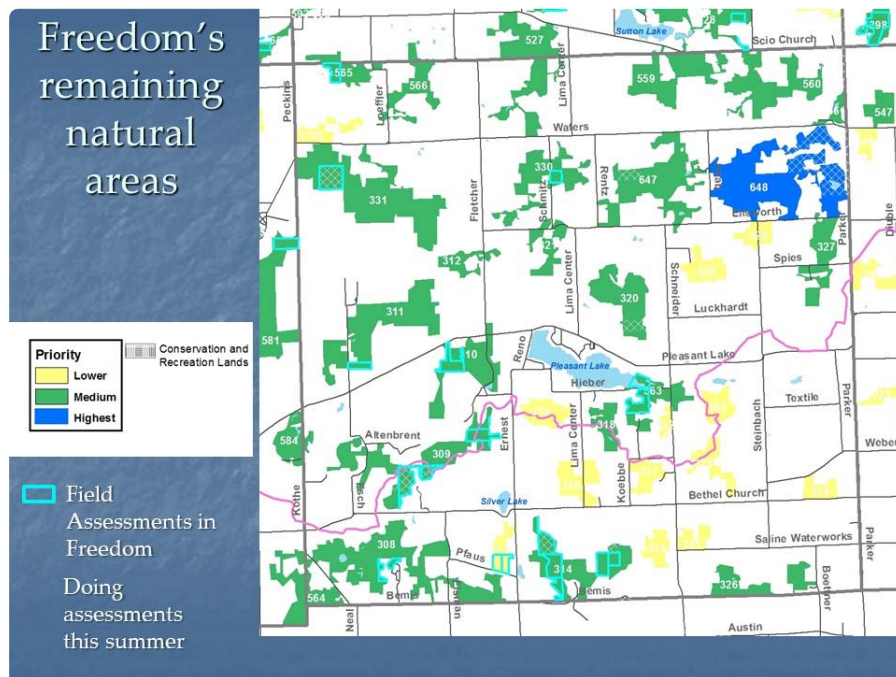
Watershed Planner from the Huron River Watershed Council, to discuss shaping future development in Freedom Township.

Twenty-five attendees reviewed the area's land development history and were updated on its current status. While Freedom Township has lost 50% of its wetlands since the 1800s, Olsson praised the township for still having significant areas of undeveloped land with 23% of intact natural land ("bio-reserve" sites) and large areas of farmland.

"Currently, Pleasant Lake and its watershed are in good condition," she said. She noted that about 6% of the natural area is publicly owned and the 2010 township census identified large areas of farmland, about 500 single-family residences, and a low density of industrial sites.

The group participated in an exercise where together, they identified key open spaces, natural areas and waterways throughout Freedom Township. They then identified possible interconnections that could provide a future link to each of those areas. Olsson drew on a large mylar sheet based on the group's input, and began creating a map known as a "green infrastructure map."

At Freedom Township's February Board meeting, Planning Commission Chair Larry Lindemann reported that Olsson had finished the map and was ready to come back to discuss future actions in April or May. The Board asked to be present in addition to Planning Commission.



Map of Freedom Township showing natural areas the Huron River Watershed Council has mapped and prioritized based on 15 ecological criteria. This was the starting point for the mapping done at the workshop. Map courtesy of Huron River Watershed Council.

Once Freedom Township has the map, they will need to decide how best to use it. Olsson was very clear that the Huron River Watershed Council is not trying to stop development, but rather shape it in a way that has the least negative environmental impact on the watershed. This means encouraging compact, walkable development in areas that already have roads, water lines, and sewers, while discouraging low-density, spread-out developments in natural areas and on agricultural land.

The watershed council has created similar maps in other Washtenaw County townships. In Webster, Springfield and Ann Arbor Townships, the maps have been incorporated into their township's Master Plans. Brighton Township has a "natural features overlay" zone that includes extra requirements for developments proposed within natural areas.

Although unassociated with the watershed council's efforts, Scio Township's farmland preservation program may provide a successful model for shaping development. Scio's Master Plan includes a zoning category intended to protect existing agricultural land which allows low density development only when it is compatible with existing agricultural operations. It also has created "special planning areas" as focal points for the community, where mixed use development is encouraged. Surveys, workshops, hearings, and a vote on a small millage ensured much public participation in the creation of the plan.

Olson stated, "This meeting has generated great interest among the residents and officials in the township and we hope this will result in policy enhancements to further protect their natural areas, working lands, and waterways—including Pleasant Lake. We hope other townships will see this as a great example and will want to join Freedom Township and look at their Green Infrastructure, too."

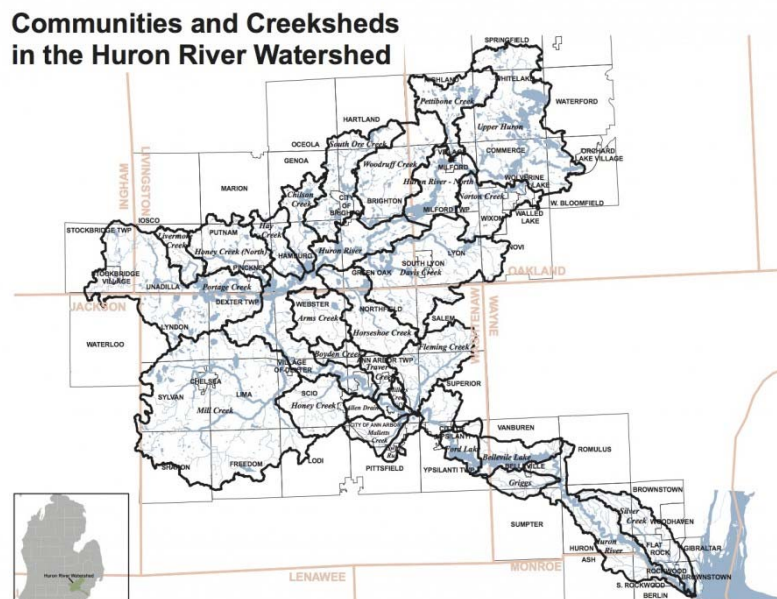
The Watershed Council is currently pursuing funding to create green infrastructure maps in three more townships and hope to include Sharon Township as one of them.

This planning session was run by in conjunction with Freedom Township's Pleasant Lake Property Owners Association (PLPOA) and Citizen's Respecting Our Waters (CROW). Green Infrastructure planning has

been developed to identify the Huron River watershed's remaining ecologically valuable lands and support their preservation. The goal is to maximize the effectiveness of public and private land conservation efforts, and to ensure land development occurs in concert with conservation in mind. Huron River Watershed Council's conservation efforts are supported by grants from a variety of sources.



Jan. 9th meeting at Freedom Township Hall. Photo courtesy of Lon Nordeen



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by **Sara Swanson**



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Sara Swanson is an editor, writer and founder of the Manchester Mirror. She is on the Manchester Community Garden committee, the First Steps Fundraising Committee, and a founder and board member of the Manchester Ladies Society.

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