Near the midway point of our overnight canoe trip on Michigan’s Au Sable River, I wrenched my back. The timing was not the greatest. My son, Brandon, and I still needed to finish our first day of paddling, pitch our dome tent, start a fire and make dinner.

I knew I could not be of much help. Then again, Brandon really didn’t need my help. “Dad, I’ve got it,” he said.

I mostly watched as my son put up the tent, gathered firewood, started our campfire and cooked our dinner, which consisted of a foil packet main dish and baked beans. On one hand, it felt weird to sit while my son worked. On the other, I marveled at his sheer competence in an outdoor setting. Here, in this beautiful, remote natural area, he felt at home.

As parents and grandparents, we don’t need recognition or credit for exposing our kids to the outdoors. We just need to make it happen. I would argue that creating outdoor experiences for our children is a priceless gift, one that is almost certain to be passed down to the next generation. Stuff comes and goes. Experiences stick, forever shaping our lives.

That doesn’t mean all the experiences must be glorious or even comfortable. (Brandon and I once tent-camped in 15-degrees-below-zero temperatures at a Boy Scout Klondike in Wayne County, and my own mom and dad spent a night patching a leaky tent near Lake Milton in Mahoning County.) The important thing is helping kids create their own outdoor connections, which are essential to forming a healthy conservation ethic.

Our kids need a nudge, and they need it now. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, children ages 8-18 spend an average of 53 hours a week using entertainment media. Another study showed that in a typical week, only 6 percent of kids ages 9-13 play outside on their own — something local foods guru Ben Bebenroth, chef and owner of Cleveland’s Spice Kitchen + Bar, did while growing up in a semi-rural part of Strongsville.

“My brother (Brad) and I were constantly out in the woods,” Bebenroth said. “We were left to our own devices, to go out and explore. It was really our first taste of freedom and our first test of responsibility and trust.”

Today, Ben and his wife, Jackie, spend most Sundays exploring the outdoors with their daughter Sydney, 7, and son Burke, 4. Ben said whether it is hiking, sloshing around in a creek or adding the household compost to the garden, the activities are helping their children “develop mutual respect for all living things. They are fascinated by the natural world, and they are really sharp.”

As a child, Shaker Heights native Sarah Spiegler (my cousin’s daughter) loved camping and hiking with her Girl Scout troop, and she later spent her summers as a resident camper at Camp Crowell/Hilaka, a Girl Scout camp in Richfield. Her love for the outdoors led her to study biology and environmental science at Kenyon College and then later attended Duke University, where she earned a Master’s degree in Environmental Management and spent a year studying coastal environmental management at the university’s Marine Lab in Beaufort, N.C.

Sarah has also worked for the Louisiana-based environmental nonprofit Bayou Grace Community Services, served as a creel clerk for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources on Lake Erie and as a contractor with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in North Carolina, studying sea-level rise. This summer, she is a tour guide on Shackleford Banks, a barrier island which is home to more than 100 wild horses and is part of the Cape Lookout National Seashore.

She said her outdoor experiences as a child were “hugely influential in my career choices.”

“I think it is really important right now to get kids outside because of all the distractions of technology, both for the health of our society, and for the health of our natural resources,” she said. “I’ve found if you can get kids away from their iPad/iPhone/computer, they will love the experience of just being outside in nature.”

Well put. Let’s start by setting an example. It just might be the next big thing.

Wood is the director of communications and marketing for the Land Conservancy.
Enduring and prosperous. These two words have become our guiding lights over the last few years as we have learned more and more about the communities of our region. All too often people settle for either enduring distress or fleeting prosperity; we never seem to be able to have both enduring AND prosperous communities. Cleveland is a great example. It boomed for decades, creating more millionaires than any city in the world about 100 years ago. The population exploded between 1875 and 1925, growing from about 100,000 to 900,000 people in a mere 50 years. It was the very heart of bubbly prosperity. And yet it has slowly diminished and enduring distress has settled in like a bad hangover. Today the city of Cleveland has fewer residents than it had in 1900.

This is true of many cities like Detroit, Buffalo and Dayton. All of these cities experienced fleeting prosperity. The question is what causes enduring prosperity and what causes fleeting prosperity? Why did all of these cities experience the same fate?

We all know that *causes* matter more than *effects*. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. And yet far too often we focus on the *effects*; we treat the symptoms and not the disease. To understand *causes*, one must first apply the laws of nature, because these laws are the *causes* that govern all of the *effects*. To understand the *causes* that govern cities and other human communities, one must apply the natural laws that govern people, because cities are nothing more than collections of people.

There are two natural laws that govern all living things; they cause everything else, they are foundational and essential:

1. All living things, including people, are a reflection of their environment, and not of an innate property or genetic code.
2. All living things, including people, move away from toxins and towards nutrients, if they *can*.

In the natural world, we learn that enduring prosperity or vitality is defined by a lack of toxins and the presence of adequate nutrients. Every living thing is governed by its habitat, by its environment. All living things – be they cells, humans, businesses, cities, states, etc. – are actually reflections of their environment. Every living thing moves away from danger and toxins and towards healthy and nutritious things. Most of us recognize this truth when thinking about the natural world. We understand that birds migrate to follow food sources or to be in climatic conditions where they can be healthy. We understand that trees will grow toward sunlight and that seedlings will wither in poor soil. We don’t always remember, though, that people, too, are “natural,” and that communities of people function pursuant to the laws of nature.

In cities and in all metropolitan regions, which are human communities, it is true that the habitat or the environment governs the success of the place. Once vibrant communities have been abandoned as former residents have moved away from blight, crime or toxins to move toward suburban areas that are believed to be healthier places to live. Foundational assets in metro areas are often natural resources, but the common denominator of metro success is what we like to term, *Clean and Green*. This means that a place or a region has a relative lack of dirty and toxic things and a relative abundance of healthy and nutritious things. This always leads to enduring prosperity. Regions like Austin, Boston and Portland are clean and green. Places like Detroit have lots of toxic legacy and are not clean and green despite recent efforts.

The first part is simple: no soot, no smog, no vacant abandoned homes, no rusted out buildings, no PCBs and dioxins, no filthy water, etc.

Once the place is relatively “clean,” and once it both looks and smells clean, the healthy and nutritious things can be viable, and these are very diverse. Lots of trees, parks, preserves. Clean air. Clean water. Attractive buildings. Intact streets and other shared infrastructure.

The challenge is that humans have become so distant from the natural world that we have forgotten that we are “natural” and that we are nothing more than a complex community of trillions of cells living together in a system called a human being. We have lost touch with nature as well, so we do not take time to observe the laws of nature that govern everything, including human communities.

So we often focus our attention and energy and financial resources on issues such as jobs, or education, or on everything else that is an *effect* and we fail to focus on
the cause. The cause is always the presence of toxins and the absence of nutrients. The cause is always the habitat, the place itself.

Simple observation proves this point: Places all over the world that grew in a dirty polluted way achieved only fleeting prosperity... Cleveland, Detroit, Youngstown, Manchester, England and many others. Places that grew in a cleaner and greener way have achieved enduring prosperity and vitality ... Boston, Paris, Vienna, Toronto and Geneva.

When and how will these observations influence the planning that we do as a region? When will the first and the largest investment be in the “habitat” and not the effects of the habitat?

The Land Conservancy believes the time for that investment is now. That is why we have been protecting so many beautiful natural areas from the earliest days of our organization’s existence. It is why we added farmland preservation to our work, as having locally grown food sources is critical to having a nutrient-rich environment. It is also why, two years ago, we looked at Ohio’s foreclosure-ravaged neighborhoods and created a program called Thriving Communities Institute to help revitalize our urban areas. And it is why we are now reaching out to all the stakeholders in eastern Ohio’s shale region – landowners, environmental groups, oil and gas firms, governments and others – to build consensus about creating a forward-looking conservation plan that will help preserve the region’s enduring natural assets, revitalize its aging cities and towns, and guard against the pitfalls of fleeting prosperity for decades to come.

Let’s challenge ourselves and each other to focus on the causes of enduring vitality and prosperity, rather than the aftereffects when it is only fleeting. We can create enduring vitality and prosperity for ourselves and for future generations by investing now in the places where we live, work and play and by employing thoughtful planning rather than reactionary thinking. The time for conservation and revitalization has never been more urgent than it is right now.

Cochran is the president and CEO of the Land Conservancy.
Conservation partnerships create a 600-acre preserve on Lake Erie

Paul Palagyi walks along a stretch of Lake Erie beach filled with smooth round rocks of every color and gnarled yet strikingly beautiful driftwood. The executive director of Lake Metroparks is brimming with excitement about one of the region’s most significant land conservation stories of 2013 – the creation of an approximately 600-acre public park featuring two miles of undeveloped coastline.

Palagyi knows such projects do not happen very often. Or very easily.

“It’s almost unheard of – two miles of undisturbed Lake Erie coastline,” he says. “We’ve had naturalists, including people from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who tell us it looks like the Oregon coast.”

In the shadow of the Perry Nuclear Power Plant, Lake Erie Bluffs is poised to become a nationally significant preserve that will become a coastal destination for outdoor enthusiasts throughout the region, including birders, hikers, anglers and kayakers. Several rare species have been spotted on this important migratory bird stopover, most notably a family of Merlins, the first Ohio nesting record of this state-listed raptor since the 1830s. Other rare bird species found on the property include the Alder Flycatcher, the Blue-winged Warbler and the White-eyed Vireo.

All told, the park is home to 20 documented rare plant and wildlife species.

The last of the three “pieces” of the Lake Erie Bluffs puzzle fell into place this year when the Land Conservancy worked with Lake Metroparks to secure about $7.7 million in funding for a 345-acre tract in Perry Township that connects 140 acres of existing parkland to the east with another 115 acres – land formerly owned by Lubrizol and acquired through the Trust for Public Land – to the west.

“Without the Land Conservancy, this connection doesn’t happen,” Palagyi says.

Brett Rodstrom, vice president of eastern field operations for the Land Conservancy, says the organization “does not often get an opportunity to protect more than two miles of natural Lake Erie shoreline anywhere in Ohio, much less in an urbanized area like...
Lake Erie Bluffs is expected to give a significant boost to the local economy, especially when the park becomes fully accessible to the birding and hiking communities. A USFWS study showed birders contribute more than $36 billion to the U.S. economy; in the same report, 26 percent of Ohio residents listed themselves as birdwatchers, compared to the national average of 21 percent.

During a bird walk hosted by the Land Conservancy earlier this year, participants spotted nine bald eagles. “At the end of the day, Lake Erie Bluffs will be recognized as a nationally significant birding area,” Rodstrom predicts.

Standing at the end of Lane Road, a street built for an industrial park that never took off, Palagyi points to a brushy area where a driveway will soon be built. The drive will lead from Lane Road to an approximately 50-car parking lot in a field overlooking the shoreline. Palagyi says a planned trail system will extend for several miles, allowing hikers and bicyclists to explore the entire park from one end to another. Plans also call for installation of paths to the beach.

As for Palagyi, he says he can’t wait for the public to see what the park staff and board does with the site. “The first time I looked at this property I said, ‘This is amazing.’ I haven’t changed my opinion.”
You may know it as U.S. Route 20 or Euclid Avenue. Jim Bissell looks at the same highway and sees something very different. He envisions a time, some 13,000 years ago, when the ridge-running road was the coastline of glacial Lake Warren, a predecessor to Lake Erie. In places like Ashtabula County’s Geneva Swamp, the ridge overlooks the kind of sand barrens and swamp forests present when Moses Cleaveland arrived at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River in 1796.

"Here you can see the last remnants of what downtown Cleveland would have looked like," Bissell says.

The excitement is genuine. For the past 42 years, Bissell, director of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History’s Center for Conservation & Biodiversity and coordinator of its Natural Areas Program, has been one of the region’s most effective leaders when it comes to preserving rare natural lands like Geneva Swamp.

Today, he heads what is believed to be the only conservation effort of its type by a city-based museum in the United States. The Center for Conservation & Biodiversity and its Natural Areas Program are creating a system of nature preserves that best represents the broad spectrum of biodiversity found in northern Ohio.

“Our main goal is to look at a broad spectrum of natural communities – hardwood forests, Lake Erie islands, fossil dune ridges, marshes, swamp and glacial wetlands – and acquire the best examples of each,” he says.

For example, Bissell says, the museum is now in the process of acquiring a glacial slump, which sounds like a baseball problem but is really a bluish-gray clay embankment found along the Rocky, Grand and Cuyahoga rivers.

The museum has also preserved no fewer than eight parcels on Kelleys Island, some in conjunction with the Land Conservancy. Last year, the museum, the Land Conservancy and the Kelleys Island Village Park District preserved two parcels containing a globally imperiled Great Lakes Alvar ecosystem and a rare mature red cedar
forest. For a botanist like Bissell, the island’s limestone features provide a rare opportunity.

“I never get tired of going to Kelleys, and Lake Erie is just so cool,” he says.

In addition to its land-protection work, the museum offers an extraordinary service to the community that is not widely known to the public. Established in 1973, the Conservation Outreach Program has allowed private landowners, state agencies, park managers and conservation organizations to request field inventories of natural lands.

These environmental assessments – often done by museum staff members who are nationally recognized experts – are critical to identifying what species of plants and animals inhabit a particular parcel. An inventory may even identify species that are listed by state or federal governments as rare or threatened.

The Land Conservancy relies on the museum to do natural resource surveys on properties it wants to protect with conservation easements. Rich Cochran, the Land Conservancy’s president and chief executive officer, credits Bissell and his team with raising the profile of conservation to new levels in northern Ohio.

“Jim Bissell is an amazing conservationist for so many reasons,” Cochran says. “He is a brilliant biologist and ecologist, he truly cares about other people and he is honest and ethical. Jim knows more about the natural resources of this area than anyone. Perhaps most of all, Jim is distinguished by his lifelong devotion to his work, working consistently and tirelessly towards an astounding record of achievement. His leadership of the Conservation Outreach program led to the development of an outstanding service that we and many other conservation partners have relied on for many years. We are deeply grateful to Jim and his team.”

Bissell, who in 2004 won the prestigious Natural Areas Association George B. Fell Award for his dedication to preserving natural areas, says he views the program as a valuable free service to the community.

“When we started, there was not a lot of knowledge about where the good stuff was in northern Ohio in terms of species,” he says. “The museum brought a new perspective. Things (state naturalists) thought were rare were everywhere in the snow belt.”

As a result, about 200 species were removed from the state’s original list of rare plants. Approximately half the species removed were the result of findings by the museum, Bissell says.

The Center for Conservation & Biodiversity staff includes Associate Director Renee Boronka, GIS & Stewardship Specialist Garrett Ormiston, Land Steward Keith Moran, Biodiversity Coordinator David Kriska, Herbarium Coordinator Patricia L. MacKeigan, Conservation Specialists Judy Semroc, Larry Rosche and Stanley Stine, and Assistant Director of Development Kate Zannoni. “They work well together and they are as passionate about conservation as anyone you would hope for,” Bissell says.

To date, the museum has preserved 5,525 acres and expects to add more this year. Preserves now open to the public include Mentor Marsh in Mentor, Scheele Preserve on Kelleys Island and the North Kingsville Sand Barrens in Ashtabula County. In addition, the museum became the first conservation organization in Ohio to acquire land with the aid of wetland mitigation funds when it purchased the 215-acre Pymatuning Creek Fen, now McCoy State Nature Preserve, in Ashtabula County.

“We are always looking to preserve the native biodiversity of this amazing region,” Bissell says.
A energetic Denzel Palmer strides out of Lorain City Hall and turns to his colleagues. “Let’s go!” shouts Palmer, an Ashland University junior who is part of a six-member team surveying Lorain’s approximately 30,000 structures. For Palmer and his co-workers, it is the start of another work day in which they will exhaustively inventory parcels in their hometown, noting even the smallest details.

Tablet computers in hand, team members fan out across Lorain to grade the condition of homes on an A-to-F scale and to input photos and other data that will be used to create maps, charts and reports for city leaders. The inventory, done by the Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute for the city, will identify the number of vacant structures in Lorain, help determine the best use of available demolition funds and assist leaders in determining the need for additional money to raze blighted homes.

“Our goal is to help city officials identify the number of vacant structures in Lorain so it can strategically use the limited demolition funding that is now available and give them an idea of how much it would cost to tear down those in the worst condition,” says Sarah Ryzner, project director for Thriving Communities.

Ryzner says the results will also help the city plan for re-use of vacant parcels.

The survey crew consists of five college students from Lorain – Palmer, Bowling Green State University junior Allie Witherspoon, Baldwin-Wallace University senior Matt Kusznir and Ohio University juniors Aaron Ceja and Daniel Bickel – plus project leader Adrian Maldonado of Berea. Maldonado, whose background is in construction, says the students understand the city wants a thorough survey of all its structures.

“Our job is to document every parcel, not just the nice ones, not just the bad ones,” he says.

Maldonado says while the team is on schedule, it is finding that some neighborhoods take a bit longer to survey than others. The crew’s emphasis is on thoroughness and attention to detail, not speed, he says.

Such an inventory can be extremely beneficial to cities like Lorain, which was hit hard by the foreclosure crisis. Lorain Mayor Chase Ritenauer has indicated that as many as 1,100 homes in the city may need to be demolished,
and this survey will help determine which of those structures should be the first to be razed.

Paul Boehnlein, the Land Conservancy’s GIS and conservation planning specialist, says the survey is the result of great collaboration between Thriving Communities and Lorain, one that leverages the city’s existing technology infrastructure and his nonprofit’s technical, fundraising and field work expertise to gather geographic data remotely. “I think there are a lot of local governments in Northeast Ohio that are developing these types of capabilities, and I think Thriving Communities is positioned to identify good ideas that are working well in one part of our service area and help to replicate those types of projects in other areas,” he says.

For the students, the survey is a chance to help forge a better future for their community.

“I think blight is one of the biggest problems plaguing the city,” Ceja says.

Kusznir, who graduated from Admiral King High School, says if the city is able to demolish the worst homes evaluated in the vacancy survey, “Those eyesores that we’ve had for decades will finally be gone.”

The students ask three main questions when evaluating a parcel: 1) Does it have a structure?; 2) If so, is that structure vacant or occupied?; and 3) What is the condition of the structure? Tell-tale signs that a house may be vacant include an overstuffed mailbox, high grass, no visible address and boarded up windows.

“Sometimes it is the neighbors who tell us a house is vacant,” Witherspoon says.

Working in teams of two, the surveyors gather information while on sidewalks and public rights-of-way.

Most of the vacant homes fall into the A, B or C grade range. Others have significant problems – crumbling chimneys, cracked foundations and leaky roofs – that could put them on the list for demolition.

Thriving Communities, the Land Conservancy’s urban revitalization arm, has helped establish county land banks throughout Ohio and has been instrumental in getting federal and state money earmarked for demolition. This survey, which was made possible by a grant from the Nord Family Foundation, will quantify the current need for demolition in the city of Lorain and assist the city in accessing the nearly $2.1 million in demolition funding available to Lorain County through the Ohio Attorney General’s Moving Ohio Forward Program.

Palmer, a graduate of Lorain High School, says he supports the mayor’s plans to demolish the worst of the city’s vacant homes and feels the work he is doing is important for the future health of his community.

“I want to see Lorain thriving again, thanks to Thriving Communities,” he says.
‘Keeping it a farm was important’

Andy and Sally Daron never had to make the big decision facing many other farmers.

No one had ever proposed turning Daron Farms, located in Richland County, northwest of Mansfield, into a housing development or a big-box retail outlet. But the Darons knew there might come a time when there could be pressure to sell the property. So the lifelong farm family made a big decision of its own.

The Darons put a conservation easement on the farm, permanently preserving 252 acres.

“It’s always been a farm, and it should always be one,” Sally Daron says.

The family worked with the Land Conservancy to preserve Andy and Sally Daron’s 154-acre farm and an adjacent 98-acre farm owned by Andy’s parents, the late Roger and Carl Jean Daron. Andy McDowell, vice president of western field operations for the Land Conservancy, says the property is the first farm in Richland County to be accepted into the State of Ohio’s Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program. The farm also received partial funding through the Federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program.

“The Darons have set the bar high for farmland preservation in Richland County,” McDowell says.

Andy Daron, who in 1988 purchased the property his father had farmed for the previous owners, says he learned about the easement program from friend Brian Smith, the Huron County farmer who has preserved agricultural acreage through a Land Conservancy conservation easement. He was soon sold on the idea.

“To me, keeping it a farm was important,” Andy says. “I would not ever want to see a bunch of houses or trailers on this property. Putting the conservation easement in place takes all that away. It will always be a farm.”

The Darons are the first actual purchasers of the farm, which had been owned by the same family since the original sheepskin deed was signed by President James Monroe in the early 1800s. The farm became available because there were no heirs to take it over.

The farm includes a grain operation and four...
greenhouses totaling 10,000 square feet. Most of the farm acreage is devoted to grain production -- corn, soybeans, wheat and a small crop of hay. The greenhouses, which now produce more than 3,000 hanging baskets and flower beds for wholesale to grocery stores and individuals and 15,000 mums for wholesale and retail distribution, are part of a plan by the family to diversify revenue streams. The plan also includes selective timbering of a woodlot on the property.

The retail flower business, now in its second year, is booming. Orders for funerals, weddings and other events are pouring in on a regular basis.

“I commend the Darons for not only being the first (AEPP farm) in the county, but also for having a diversified operation that includes an expanding greenhouse operation in addition to the traditional row crops,” McDowell says.

The Darons use sustainable methods of farming, including conservation crop rotation, nutrient management, residue management and mulch till. And the entire family is actively involved in the farm: Andy and Sally get help from daughter Andie Marie, 17, a Plymouth High School senior basketball player and Future Farmers of America member, and son Ben, 21, who maintains the website for the business. Another daughter, Amanda, 27, now works as a preschool education coordinator but has spent plenty of time on the farm.

Interestingly, the farm sits on the very edge of the divide between the Great Lakes and Ohio River watersheds. Water from the Daron property ultimately flows into Lake Erie, while water just a few hundred feet to the south drains to the Ohio River and the Gulf of Mexico. So while the rain falling in this part of Richland County might end up in wildly different places, the simple, enduring charms of Daron Farms will remain very much the same.

Sally Daron says the family’s greenhouse business has grown more quickly than she expected.

Floral designer Ruby Combs also keeps the greenhouse tidy.

“The Darons have set the bar high for farmland preservation in Richland County.”

Andy McDowell
WILD IN WARREN

Flowers, native plants replace weeds in city’s vacant lots

Wildflowers are at the heart of a fledgling economic development project in Warren. The city, which now has more than 1,000 vacant lots and hundreds of homes in need of demolition, needed a way to keep the empty parcels looking spiffy until they can be used for another purpose. Enter forward-thinking Dennis Blank, a longtime Time Inc. marketing executive who lived in New York and London before retiring and returning to his native Warren in 2011.

“The vacant lots look better than the homes that sat on them, but they don’t look good,” he says.

So Blank had an idea.

He proposed planting wildflowers and native plants on the derelict, vacant lots as a low-cost way to beautify them. Today, gregg’s gardens -- named for the late Gregg Snyder, a lifelong Warren resident who was killed in a 2011 bicycling accident -- is considered a model program for communities striving to maintain pride in their neighborhoods while blighted homes are being demolished.

The program, now in its second year, is supported by the civic group The Trumbull 100, the Trumbull Neighborhood Partnership, the city, the Trumbull County Land Reutilization Corporation, also known as the Trumbull County Land Bank, The Raymond John Wean Foundation and dozens of grassroots donors. The Trumbull 100 recently added another dimension to its effort by inviting the Fund for Our Economic Future – a collaborative effort to strengthen the region’s economic competitiveness -- into the process.

In 2012 gregg’s gardens converted 22 vacant lots in Warren to wildflower and native plant gardens; the goal for 2013 is to convert more than 100 gardens in a 22-square-block neighborhood near the center of the city. The proposed “Garden District” now contains nearly 90 vacant lots, and an additional 60-plus houses in the neighborhood are likely to be demolished by the city this year, including all boarded-up and fire-damaged dwellings.

“This is a great example of what a community and its leaders can do to beautify a neighborhood and provide a great transitional use for vacant parcels before they can be reutilized. Warren and its residents should be proud of gregg’s gardens,” says Jim Rokakis, director of the Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute, which helped form the Trumbull County Land Bank.

Matt Martin, program director for TNP, the fiscal agent for gregg’s gardens, says while the wildflower program cost about $1,000 per lot in the first year, he
expects that figure to drop this summer. First-year planting assistance was provided by Davey Resource Group and Ohio Prairie Nursery; the gardens are maintained by volunteers and those referred by court community service programs.

“The immediate neighbors are very, very positive about the program,” Martin says. “And the idea of doing something that can be applied to a large number of vacant lots is very appealing to us.”

Blank, who now blends his love of media and politics by writing a blog called warrenexpressed.org, says Warren’s Garden District is the oldest neighborhood in the city and has about 650 homes. It is directly north of the downtown area and borders Warren G. Harding High School.

“If not unique, it is unusual to have a nice residential neighborhood within walkable distance to the downtown area,” he says.

Blank says he and others are working closely with the city to follow up on plans to demolish about 60 houses in the Garden District this summer with funds from the Ohio Attorney General’s Moving Ohio Forward Program. “The combination of removing the very worst houses and adding 100 gardens to this beautiful old neighborhood will, we believe, rekindle interest and economic activity and ultimately restore it to its former glory,” he says.

The gardens serve several purposes. They beautify lots that would otherwise be strewn with trash and weeds. They hold down maintenance costs for the city. And their presence can help attract new homeowners to the neighborhood – those who will renovate and repair existing houses.

“We can attract younger people who don’t necessarily have a $50,000 down payment,” Blank says. “I think people will want to see these wildflowers, and I think people will want to live here.”

According to Blank, the vacant city lots are ideal for this use because wildflowers prefer nutrient-poor soil. Winter rye grass is planted with the wildflower seeds to suppress weeds and control erosion until the native plants are established. This grass dies in mid-summer and wildflowers bloom.

Blank says he is pleased that the community got behind this project.

“This is a real-world example of how local government, nonprofits, businesses, private citizens and volunteers can work together effectively towards community revitalization,” he says.
Civic activist has spent a lifetime preserving Little Beaver Creek

In the 1930s, decades after beavers had been almost wholly eradicated from eastern Ohio by unregulated trapping and logging, William Henry Vodrey, Jr. devised a comeback plan. He purchased a pair of beavers from a state agency in Wisconsin, placed them in a fenced-in pond on his family’s property in Columbiana County and hoped they would reproduce. Well, they eventually did. But not exactly as planned.

The beavers burrowed under the pond-side fence within a single day and made their way to nearby Little Beaver Creek, says Jackman S. Vodrey, a grandson of William Henry Vodrey, Jr. The animals quickly took to their new surroundings. The rest was history.

“That is how beavers returned to Little Beaver Creek,” Vodrey says.

Vodrey is passionate about Little Beaver Creek, its natural beauty and its rich history. The lawyer and civic activist lives in the village of Fredericktown at the confluence of the creek’s north and middle forks, six miles north of East Liverpool. He has been a driving force for conservation in the watershed.

In 1993, Vodrey, along with Carol Bretz and Keith Meredith, co-founded the Little Beaver Creek Land Foundation, which merged with Western Reserve Land Conservancy at the start of 2013.
The extended Vodrey family has also permanently preserved 2,600 acres of its 4,100-acre Beaverkettle Farms property with conservation easements co-held by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Natural Areas and Preserves and the Columbiana County Soil and Water Conservation District. The magnificent property straddles the State-designated Wild and Scenic Little Beaver Creek and borders the Sheepskin Hollow State Nature Preserve, which also came from the family’s Beaverkettle Farms property.

Jackman Vodrey fell in love with Beaverkettle and Fredericktown as a boy, when he would hike the property’s forested uplands and beautiful valleys with his grandfather and father, Bill. He returned to Columbiana County for good in 1963, after having graduated from Princeton University and the University of Michigan Law School.

“I have a great affinity for Little Beaver Creek,” Vodrey says. “We are so fortunate to have this beautiful, unspoiled stream to enjoy. I just love it.”

Vodrey co-founded Little Beaver Creek Land Foundation to further preserve acreage along the stream and in the watershed. (In the merger, the Land Conservancy assumed stewardship of the land permanently protected by LBCLF.)

Vodrey has chaired the state’s Little Beaver Creek Wild and Scenic River Advisory council since 1974, and in 2001 he was honored by ODNR’s Division of Natural Areas and Preserves for his conservation efforts for Little Beaver Creek. Each May, he hosts the annual Gard-Vodrey Hike, an open walk through Beaverkettle farms in honor of his father, William Henry Vodrey III, and his father’s good friend, the late local historian R. Max Gard.

Today, Vodrey still finds peace when he returns home to Fredericktown, a charming, throwback town where everyone knows everyone else, from his law office in East Liverpool. He says that while members of the Vodrey family are now scattered across the country from Connecticut to California, “They all love Fredericktown. It is special.”

And so is the creek which runs alongside it.

“We are fortunate to have this beautiful, unspoiled stream to enjoy.”

Jackman S. Vodrey

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Annual hike showcases creek’s natural beauty

About 80 outdoor enthusiasts, including several Land Conservancy staff members, took part in the 47th annual Gard-Vodrey Hike on May 8 in Columbiana County. The four-mile hike, which honors the memory of local historians R. Max Gard and William Henry Vodrey III, gave folks from many different walks of life – teachers, lawyers, conservationists, retirees and students – a view of protected land along Little Beaver Creek near Fredericktown.

“There is not another place like it in the state,” said hiker Mike West of Lisbon, a Columbiana County Park District commissioner who spent 28 years working for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

Hikers enjoyed the beautiful scenery at the vast Beaverkettle Farms, which is owned by the extended Vodrey family and much of which has been permanently protected by conservation easements. Event host Jackman S. Vodrey urged hikers to enjoy the wildlife and wildflowers on the property, but to remove only litter and invasive plants.

The trail led hikers down steep ravines, across a swinging bridge and to the Tubs, a series of natural pools in scoured-out rock, before ending in Fredericktown.

“The Tubs are very cool,” said Aaron Hartsough, 21, of Boardman who, along with his sister Leanna, are the fourth generation of their families continuing the Gard-Vodrey Hike tradition. On the other hand, Chris Daniels of Wellsville was on the walk for the first time.

“I live ten miles away and I’ve never been here before. I’m glad I came,” he said.
EverGreen EverBlue goes on hiatus until 2014

By any measure, this past year has been our busiest ever. We dramatically increased the pace of our work, preserving an additional 5,500 acres, expanding our urban revitalization work throughout the state, extending our service area in northern Ohio and moving into a new building.

So when it was time to plan our signature event, EverGreen EverBlue, we paused to catch our collective breath. We love hosting a party for 600 people each year, but it takes a lot of time and resources – energy the Land Conservancy has been channeling toward the success of its mission.

Our to-do list was pretty full.

We decided to put EverGreen EverBlue on a one-year hiatus, a break that will enable us to focus on our core work while we reimagine the event. EverGreen EverBlue will next take place in the fall of 2014, when attendees can again expect a night of breathtaking scenery, splendid cuisine and great conversation along with a few new wrinkles designed to highlight outdoor experiences.

“We love doing EverGreen EverBlue, and the event has been wildly successful,” says Kathy Obert Hill, the Land Conservancy’s chief strategy and engagement officer. “At the same time, it has grown to be one of the largest fundraisers in the region. We determined that while the revenue from EverGreen EverBlue is critical to our important mission, the organization needs to put the event on hold for a year while we reimagine it. We expect EverGreen EverBlue to be even more popular when it returns.”

In order to fill the revenue void (and to have a little fun), the Land Conservancy is holding its first virtual fund-raiser, Imaginature. You’ll be hearing more about this soon, but this “event” will allow you to help us do our important work while dressed in a tie-dye T-shirt instead of a suit or dress. And every dollar you spend to “attend” Imaginature will be 100 percent tax-deductible.

“We appreciate the support of everyone who has attended EverGreen EverBlue over the years,” Obert Hill says. “Your dollars have supported the preservation of our region’s farmland, wildlife, natural lands and coastal lands, as well as the revitalization of urban neighborhoods throughout the state. We hope you will continue to support these efforts with your donations and will once again join us when the next EverGreen EverBlue celebration takes place in September 2014.”

Raccoon County Music Festival: great family fun

Join us for a day-long festival of traditional music – bluegrass, old-time, blues, folk, polka, Cajun and more – on Saturday, Aug. 17 in the Geauga County village of Burton.

The Raccoon County Music Festival, which runs from noon to 8 p.m. in downtown Burton, will feature performances on two stages, a fiddle contest, square dancing, spontaneous jamming and workshops for children (blues guitar and songwriting) and adults (clogging, bluegrass banjo and old-time banjo). There will be food for sale at the festival, but event-goers are also permitted to bring their own meals as well as chairs and blankets.

Admission is $10 for those ages 13 and older; $4 for children ages 6-12; and free for children age 5 and under.

The festival will be held at the Geauga County Historical Society’s Century Village Museum, 14653 East Park St., Burton. Historical village buildings and the Crossroads museum store will be open. The event is co-sponsored by the historical society and the Land Conservancy. For up-to-date information on the event schedule, visit www.raccooncountymusicfestival.com or the festival’s Facebook page.
Land Conservancy events feature food, music -- and a bit of sweat

From rock concerts to stream cleanups, Land Conservancy events draw attention to our work and the benefits of conservation.

The past year has been a particularly busy one. In the fall of 2012, we moved into our new Moreland Hills home and held a series of open houses to show off this environmentally and economically responsible project. Since then, we’ve organized dozens of hands-on experiences that help people better understand our land-protection work.

We hope you will join us at one of our events in the coming year. For updated event information, visit www.wrlandconservancy.org or like us on Facebook.

In June, more than 200 people attended our fourth annual Conservation Rocks! concert at Cleveland’s Beachland Ballroom and Tavern. The concert featured local musicians who work in the field of conservation.

Our new home in Moreland Hills was the site of several grand opening celebrations.

Our popular “Kids In” series was expanded with the addition of Kids in the Marsh, a day of exploration at our Ashcroft Woods Preserve.

Chef Mario Izzo talks about garlic mustard at our first Pest (O) Soirée in Avon.

An annual cleanup at Adam’s Run in Akron is one of several we help coordinate.

Our Kendal at Oberlin friends took a hike with the Land Conservancy.
Land Conservancy welcomes ‘conservation safety net’

The Land Conservancy has permanently preserved more than 480 properties with conservation easements. Each time we accept an easement, we pledge to uphold its terms forever by monitoring the property at least once per year and, when necessary, defending any challenges to it.

The Land Conservancy has now joined more than 400 other land trusts in 46 states and Washington D.C. to form Terrafirma, a shared conservation safety net that helps the organizations keep the promise of permanence. We are one of the largest organizations in this program, which was created by the Land Trust Alliance and is designed to defend conservation of more than 20,000 properties — including community gardens, forests, nature preserves, parks, shorelines, open space and farms — covering more than 6.3 million acres.

Terrafirma is a charitable risk pool owned by participating land trusts that insures its members against the legal costs of defending conservation. It is available for all Land Trust Alliance member land trusts with conservation easements or fee lands held for conservation. This is the flagship resource to permanently protect conserved lands, and it marks the first time that a conservation group has created a captive insurance service.

Property Council (VAPAC) director and funding move to Thriving Communities Institute

The Land Conservancy is expanding its urban mission through the addition of Frank Ford, chairman of the Vacant and Abandoned Property Action Council to the staff of Thriving Communities Institute. Thriving Communities Institute, the Land Conservancy’s urban program, has established a national reputation for its work with county land banks and urban demolition and revitalization.

VAPAC is a consortium of representatives working on reclamation and redevelopment of vacant property. Ford will serve as senior policy advisor at Thriving Communities and will continue overseeing the VAPAC program with the full ongoing support of its funders group in its new home. Ford reports to Jim Rokakis, a Land Conservancy vice president and director of Thriving Communities.

VAPAC is funded by grants from the Cuyahoga Land Bank, Cleveland City Council, Cleveland Housing Court, Neighborhood Progress Inc. and The Cleveland Foundation. VAPAC’s members include representatives from the city of Cleveland, Cuyahoga County, inner-ring suburbs and nonprofit agencies.

Corder, Czayka join land-protection team in eastern Ohio

Maggie Corder and Alex Czayka have joined the Land Conservancy as associate field directors in eastern Ohio.

Corder, formerly the Yellow Creek Watershed Coordinator at the Jefferson County Soil and Water Conservation District, will focus on land protection projects as well as both donor and partner relationships in Columbiana, Carroll and Jefferson counties. Czayka, an Ashtabula County native who was Ashtabula River project manager for The Nature Conservancy before joining the Land Conservancy, will work in Trumbull, Mahoning and Portage counties. Both Corder and Czayka will report to Brett Rodstrom, the Land Conservancy’s vice president of eastern field operations.
Vision Statement

What could be more beautiful than a crisp fall day in northern Ohio: the sun shimmering on our great Lake Erie; the red and yellow leaves of a beech maple forest; the long views of crop and pasture land framed by towering forests; and the gentle murmuring rivers that run through our glacial landscape. We love our region. It is where we rear our children and where our hearts reside.

Our vision is that today, a decade from now, and beyond the time that we can imagine, this will be a uniquely beautiful place filled with breathtaking scenic views, abundant clean rivers and lakes, and countless miles of connected trails for hiking, biking, skiing, and horseback riding. An authentic place abounding with working farms and forests, vibrant cities, and an accessible and clean great lake for world class fishing, swimming, and boating.

Development will be concentrated in historic cities such as Cleveland, Youngstown, and Akron, in enduring villages such as Chagrin Falls, Wooster, Medina and Oberlin and, as needed, in new areas that provide compact communities that thrive for generations. Farms will provide healthy and fresh foods to local markets and restaurants, connecting people with land. Parks and preserves will provide a safe haven where children can play and where adults can enjoy the tranquility of nature, and a quality of life that attracts and retains as residents a great diversity of people.

The Land Conservancy inspires citizens throughout our region to protect land and water for the benefit of all of our communities; to create a habitat that serves people. We envision a patchwork quilt of natural areas connected by wildlife and river corridors, woven in harmony with the fabric of fruitful farms, flourishing neighborhoods, and prosperous places of commerce that support the people of our region now and forever.
Western Reserve Land Conservancy extends its thanks to the following people:

Karen Adair, The Nature Conservancy
Harriet Alger
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Black River Audubon
Black River RAP
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Zoe Lye
John and Kitty Makley
Terri Martincic
Peter McCarran

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“Western Reserve Land Conservancy has performed an outstanding service in preserving land and educating the residents of northern Ohio about the importance of conservation.”

Stanley and Hope Adelstein of Pepper Pike believe in the Land Conservancy’s mission. In order to advance our work now and into the future, they have created the Stanley I. and Hope S. Adelstein Fund. The funding will initially support the Stanley I. and Hope S. Adelstein Summer Intern Program.

Stanley, a graduate of the Case Western Reserve University School of Law, first met current Land Conservancy President and CEO Rich Cochran when Rich was the Development Director at the law school. The Adelsteins credit much of the Land Conservancy’s success to Cochran’s leadership.

Giving is a way of life for the Adelsteins. And by establishing this fund, the Adelsteins joined the White Oak Legacy Society, a group of Land Conservancy supporters who have generously included us in their estate planning. People like the Adelsteins are helping ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy beautiful wildlife areas, scenic coastlines, productive farmland and urban greenways.

To find out more about making a lasting commitment to the Land Conservancy through the White Oak Legacy Society, please call Leah Whidden at (440) 528-4166.

Members include:

Anonymous (4)  
Mr. William Abell  
Stanley and Hope Adelstein  
Dr. Jay Ankeney & Dr. Julie Clayman  
Edward Baker & Anna Van Heeckeren  
Thomas E. Baker  
Peter & Molly Balunek  
Mr. Richard & Dr. Jennifer Cochran  
Margaret E. Cummins  
Beau Daane  
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