

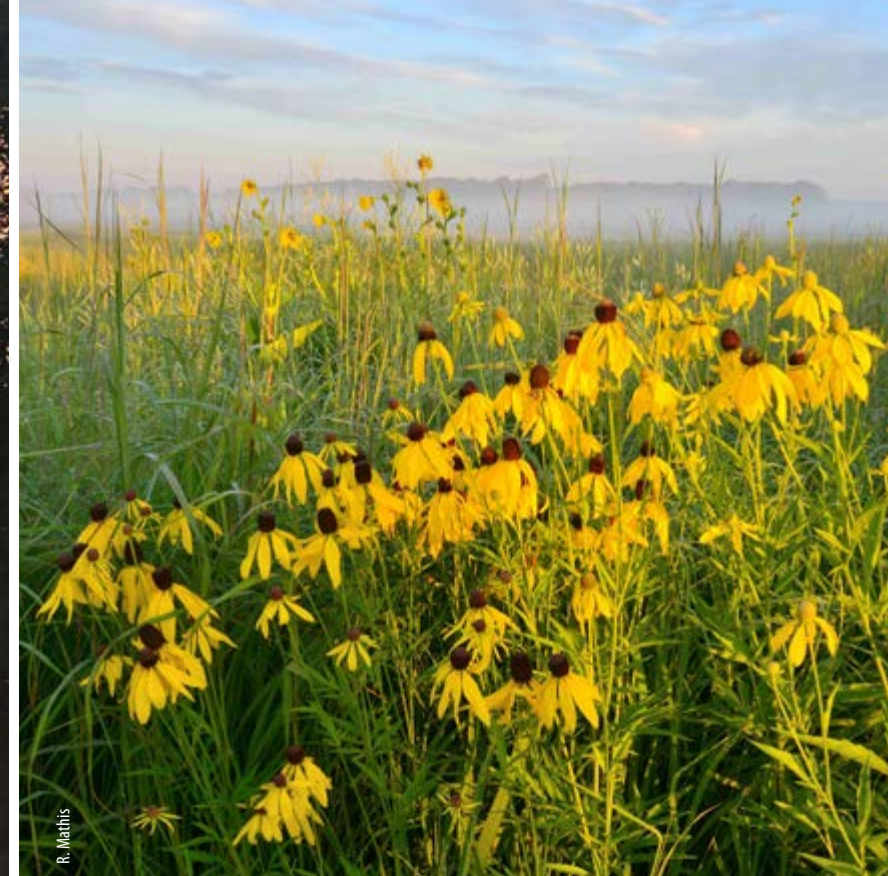


# The View Backwards

## A Half Century of Land Protection

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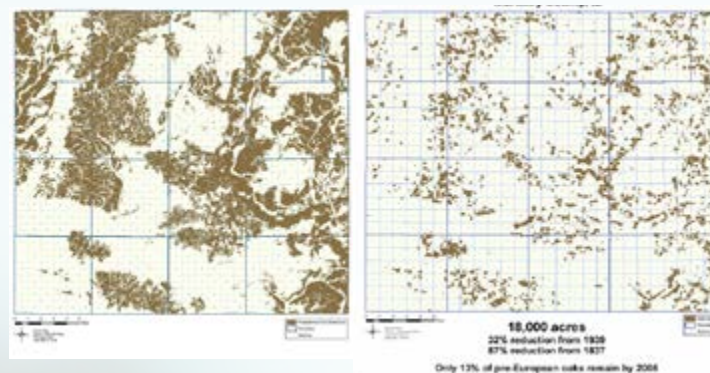


A very different McHenry County greeted the first January days of 1970. Small villages and towns, scattered across the rolling glacial landscape, lay interspersed among broad swaths of farmland and pastures. The county's population barely topped 100,000 people. To the casual eye, abundant open space seemed to be a permanent fixture of life in the region. But sweeping changes were already occurring that would forever alter the idyllic rural life enjoyed by those residents.

When McHenry County Conservation District was born, one of its primary mission protecting the county's unique natural heritage. Modestly funded by a small tax levy, District open space grew slowly in the first two decades of the agency's life, with just over 6,000 acres or about 1 1/2 % of the county's land base preserved. Within ten years, family farms and rural villages of eastern McHenry County would be engulfed in a steadily rising wave of growth. By the late 1980's that growth would sweep westward across Route 47 touching even the most remote parts of the moraines and outwash plains of McHenry County. By the mid 1990's the ability of the District to protect open space in the midst of unprecedented growth evaporated, while many residents began to recognize that McHenry County had reached a critical crossroads.

McHenry County Oak Distribution 1837

McHenry County Oak Distribution 2005

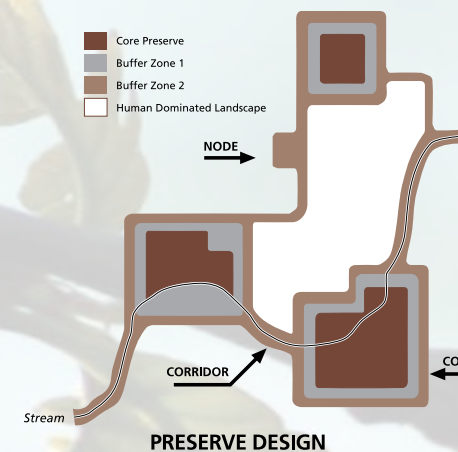


As this concern grew, the call for a more comprehensive system of protected land also began to grow and in 2001 and 2007, voter approved referenda greatly expanded the ability of the District to protect natural land in a systematic and scientifically based manner. The challenges of those land protection efforts have been complex and varied. Fortunately decades of comprehensive study of the county's natural resources coupled with newly emerging knowledge on how aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems function in a human dominated environment, allowed the District to create a truly visionary Land Protection Plan.

The District's philosophy of open space preservation evolved from protecting small, isolated sites in multiple locations to creating large preserves connected by greenway corridors. Research shows that this landscape scale approach of connected sites provides increases genetic diversity; fosters greater ecological stability; and retains viable populations of native plants and animals longer than smaller, fragmented sites. In addition, these same lands provide opportunities to link parks and open spaces for enhanced recreational opportunities wherever appropriate.

In heavily fragmented landscapes such as McHenry County, ecologically viable preserves are built utilizing three basic features. These features consist of Core Preserves, Nodes and Corridors. Core Preserves form the main building block of biologically viable preserves. These are large blocks of habitat often containing remnant natural communities or populations of key plants and animals, usually within a matrix of degraded but restorable land. Core preserves are capable of sustaining plants and animals that require large home ranges or habitat blocks to survive. They allow species that are sensitive to genetic isolation or require large blocks of continuous habitat to maintain their populations.

Nodes are smaller blocks of habitat that can support populations of plants and animals that do not require large home ranges. Nodes act as transfer stations along corridors, funneling individuals and genetic material from one core preserve to another. Many smaller Conservation Areas serve this function.



Corridors are blocks of land that connect one preserve to another permitting genetic flow to occur between populations of plants and animals that would otherwise be isolated.

Typical corridors include railroad right of ways, multiple use trails and riparian systems.

During this same period, the face of conservation also underwent dramatic changes and new partners emerged to join the District in land protection efforts. Since 2010, most District land protection efforts have been based on such partnerships with state and federal agencies, local land trusts, private land owners, farm operators and environmental groups.

Today, as the Land Protection Plan created over twenty-five years ago draws closer to completion, the 25,600 acres of District open space serves as a foundation for a much larger network of preserved lands owned or maintained by our conservation partners.

Half a century ago, a group of visionary men and women looked into a future and saw two very different paths to travel. Today we walk in beauty and inspiration among the ancient oaks, clear running streams and abundant wildlife each time we visit a conservation district site, because of their conviction and commitment.

It is to us, the inheritors of that gift, to determine what legacy shall be our own when that first century of McHenry County conservation draws to a close fifty years from now in 2071.

MCHEMRY COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT PRESERVES

OVER **8,000** ACRES

OF HIGH-QUALITY  
*WETLANDS, SAVANNAS & PRAIRIES*



### LAND ACQUISITION THROUGH THE DECADES

January 1980	=	2,610 acres
January 1990	=	4,946 acres
January 2000	=	12,879 acres
January 2010	=	23,757 acres
January 2011	=	24,846 acres
January 2021	=	25,623 acres