

Agreement to help protect 427 acres near Muskegon River in Newaygo

By Aaron Ogg | The Grand Rapids Press

January 23, 2010, 9:07AM

NEWAYGO COUNTY -- Agreements between three Brooks Township landowners and the Land Conservancy of West Michigan will restrict development of 427 acres of Muskegon River frontage and forest.

The Grand Rapids-based, non-profit land trust secured recently conservation easements that will protect fertile spawning grounds for lake sturgeon and valuable open-space wildlife habitat, said Pete DeBoer, the conservancy's land protection specialist.

DeBoer said the deals could build momentum for the nonprofit as it looks to keep a "focused eye" on preservation efforts along the 219-mile Muskegon River -- the second longest river system next to the Grand River at 260 miles.

A \$700,000 grant in 2007 from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (now the Department of Natural Resources & Environment) awarded to the Grand Rapids-based conservancy offset costs, including appraisals, surveys and payments to landowners.

"This basically gets us, hopefully, in the minds of the people on the Muskegon River," DeBoer said. "We hope to get our name out there and get people thinking about what's going to happen to their properties."

The economic downturn has been a boon to the conservancy, DeBoer said.

It protected 1,861 acres in 2009 -- the most in the land trust's 34-year history. That includes a \$19 million deal completed in December to purchase 171 acres of dune land south of the Saugatuck channel from energy mogul Aubrey McClendon.

Conservation easements restrictions commonly result in between a 30 and 55 percent property value reduction and a reduced tax burden.

The listing price for the 190-acre property owned by Bill Veit property and its 1.75 miles of river frontage is \$649,000.

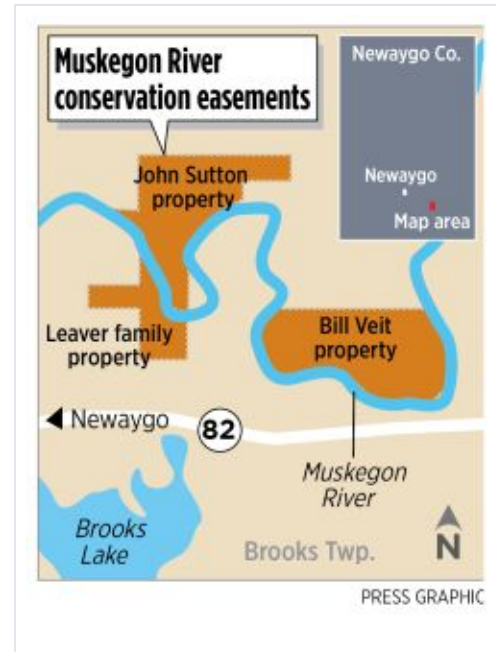
That was down from \$1.099 million prior to the agreement.

The easement limits the number of residences allowed on that property to three, DeBoer said.

Other deals were reached on the 160-acre John Sutton family property and the 70 acres of Bill and Jeanne Leaver family land, which borders Huron-Manistee National Forest.

"I just think it's the best thing we can do with property like this," said Ron Lemmon, a Grand Rapids real-estate agent with Patriot Realty who represents two of the three properties.

It's a good move for families who have owned "legacy" land for generations and want it protected, DeBoer said.



"What we're hoping to do is give people another option if they're looking down the line and thinking, 'How are we going to afford this? How is the next generation going to afford this?'" he said.

"The climate is better for protection now than it was a few years ago. You have some of these properties that developers aren't chomping up necessarily right when they go on the market."

The conservancy covers Newaygo, Kent, Ottawa, Muskegon, Oceana and parts of Allegan, Mason and Lake counties and has protected nearly 7,000 acres in West Michigan.

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