

## ACME SHORELINE

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Like that of its counterpart to the west, East Grand Traverse Bay's deep and sparkling waters are a unique treasure. The massive bay offers fishing, boating, swimming and more, all in cool, clear water of high relative quality.

But for citizens in Acme Township, a troubling thing had happened over the decades. Their slice of frontage along the bay had, like so many other places, been slowly consumed by development. A motel here. A restaurant there. Before too long, and before their eyes, a barrier composed of dozens of buildings materialized. The bay was still there, but it might as well have been miles away.

"We have nearly 10 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, but for the locals, unless you lived on the water, you didn't have much access," said longtime township resident Pat Salathiel. "It was very frustrating."

In 2006, Salathiel and other citizens approached the township board with desires to do something about the shoreline. The how would be sorted out later, but the why was clear – citizens deserved more open access to the bay. What's more, enough properties were on the market to merit a comprehensive examination of the area.



PHOTO BY ANGIE LUCAS







“Here was this small group of thoughtful and concerned citizens who recognized that there were a lot of properties going up for sale along that corridor,” former Land Protection Director Matt McDonough said. “They thought: Wouldn’t it be nice to do what Traverse City started doing 50 years ago and open up that shoreline?”

That sentiment went hand-in-hand with another bold thought: Wouldn’t it be nice to offer up Acme as a destination, not just a place one passes through on the way to Elk Rapids or Traverse City?

Salathiel and others knew that if they didn’t act then, with so many properties for sale, they’d be squandering a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“It was almost like a perfect storm of circumstances. We had the depressed economy, we had a slowdown in commercial development and we had all of these properties for sale,” she said. “We thought – oh my gosh, if we don’t do something now, it will all be redeveloped and we’ll lose this opportunity for generations to come.”

The township board designated the citizens group as an official committee, and the group not long after reached out to GTRLC.

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“It was a ludicrous idea to even think about, that we as a small township could attempt to purchase an entire shoreline,” Salathiel said. “And we realized there wasn’t a chance in heck we could get it done without some help, and that’s where the conservancy came into play.”

McDonough recalls that the idea didn’t seem particularly feasible – at least at first.

“Early on, I was thinking that this thing was pretty pie-in-the-sky,” he said. “I just didn’t see how we could pull it off. This is a multi-million dollar project with all of these buildings, some with operating businesses.”



*From left to right, Pat Salathiel, Wayne Kladder, Paul Brink and former Associate Director Megan Olds at the “greenbreaking” event.*

Even Wayne Kladder, a former GTRLC board member who served as Acme Township supervisor for much of the process, remembers thinking the outlook didn’t seem rosy.

“The whole thing looked pretty much insurmountable,” he said. “It was like having an impossible mountain to climb, to even imagine

such a thing as opening the bay.”

But after several meetings and conversations with several property owners, it became clear to McDonough, Kladder and others there was something to this crazy plan. The goal was to open up a long, continuous shoreline park over a period of several years. A phased approach would be necessary, as it would take time to line up both funding and willing property owners. The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund was a natural choice for the project, and its reaction to the first phase would determine the viability of the entire project.

That first phase involved acquisition of land just south of a small bayside park that already existed at the north end of the stretch. This three-parcel chunk included the Knollwood Motel, Shoreside Inn and Willow Beach properties. A roughly \$3 million grant request, approved in December of 2008, barely made the cut. The trust fund scoring guidelines at that time favored large, wild tracts of land, so the Acme project wasn’t particularly attractive.





*The former Mountain Jack's restaurant is demolished.*

"It was the lowest scoring application that got funded," McDonough said. "Right above the cutoff line."

Because trust fund money can only be used for land acquisition or enhancements to existing parkland, the township was on the hook for not only the local match required for the trust fund grant, but also for the building deconstruction costs. GTRLC was instrumental in fundraising for both needs.

Phase 2 involved acquisition of the former Mountain Jack's restaurant, Sun N' Sand motel and a nearby vacant lot. This time, the \$2.3 million trust fund grant was among the highest scored. In between application for Phases 1 and 2, the trust fund gave much heavier weight to potential public use and of a property and the recreational access it might provide.

Phase 3 involved actual demolition of the properties acquired in Phase 2, along with acquisition and demolition of the Beach Club Motel, which was acquired with a third trust fund grant. By 2013, the three phases of the project had opened up about six acres of land and 1,500 feet of shoreline for public use. Nearly \$3 million in private donations were raised to cover demolition and leverage about \$5.7 million in trust fund money.



*The former Sun N Sands Motel before demolition.*

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*An aerial image of the U.S. 31 corridor in Acme before any demolition.*

In addition to the primary goal of opening up more parkland for public use, the project had other notable highlights for GTRLC and the community. Nearly 90 percent of materials from the GTRLC-managed structure demolitions were recycled or reused. The township, which managed demolition of Phase 1 structures just south of its previously existing park, also placed a heavy focus on repurposing building materials from demolished structures.

The project also showcased the value and promise of multiple organizations and individuals successfully working together to achieve a common goal. Acme Township's board, a citizen committee, the GTRLC, state government via the Natural Resources Trust Fund and Michigan Department of Transportation, contractors and local citizens all banded together, each playing a vital role in the project's success.

Acme is now working hard to plan infrastructure improvements at the open land, something that didn't happen for a few years. The goal is to enhance public use of these parcels, now and into the future.

"What's nice now is this investment that they're making in an effort to get people on that land. You want to see people

walking their dog; you want to see kids playing Frisbee and tag," McDonough said. "For a long time, they just looked like vacant lots. It looked like a vision hadn't been realized, but now they're really starting to do that."

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The original and still ultimate goal is to create a continuous park from the existing Michigan Department of Transportation roadside park just south of Bunker Hill road up to the original Bayside Park near the intersection of M-72. While a large amount of land was opened up, a few parcels with buildings remain.

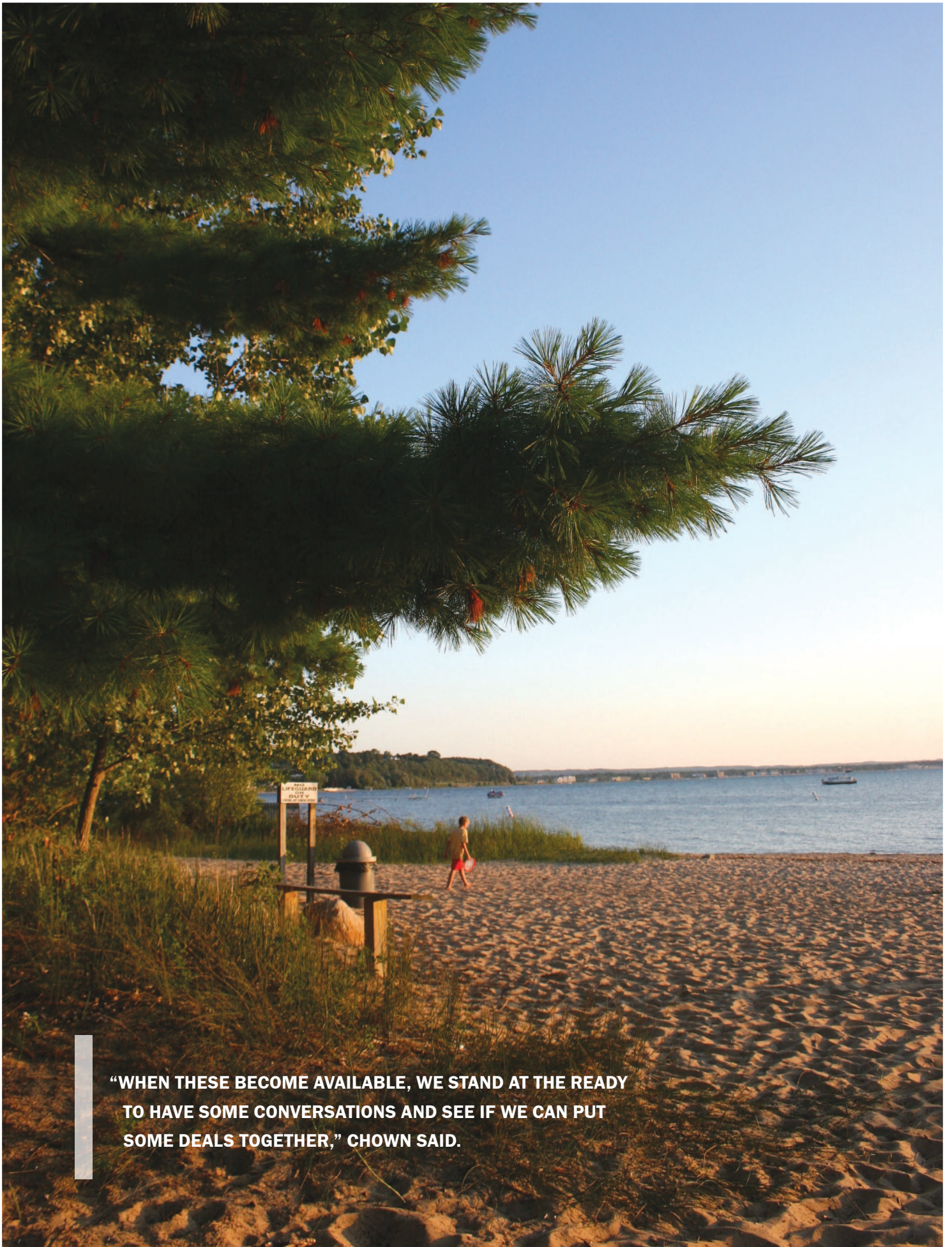
Though owners of those properties don't appear interested in selling at this time, GTRLC and the township are definitely interested in acquiring them when the time is right.

"When these become available, we stand at the ready to have some conversations and see if we can put some deals together," Chown said.

But what's happened so far is nothing to scoff about, either.

"It took Traverse City nearly 50 years to open up the waterfront," McDonough said. "And the fact that we got 11 of those 24 parcels acquired in just few years, that's a pretty good start."





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