



GLACIAL HILLS

The beautifully wooded rolling hills of central Antrim County capture the essence of what it means to be outside in Northern Michigan. Eye-popping blazes of fall color delight hikers and birdwatchers, while mountain bikers revel in the scenic terrain. Glimpses of magnificent Torch Lake, peaceful Lake Bellaire and other clean bodies of water in the fabled Chain of Lakes are a treat to anyone stopping for a breather on their outdoor jaunt.

Smack dab in the middle of all of it is a special place called the Glacial Hills Pathway and Natural Area. This 763-acre wonder encompasses land owned by Antrim County, Forest Home Township and the Village of Bellaire. Aside from its ever-increasing popularity for hiking and biking, this expansive natural area boasts tremendous biodiversity. It contains a dozen natural habitat types that support more than 20 species of trees and more than 100 species each of birds and wildflowers.

This place is possible because of the foresight of Mark Sevald, a Grand Rapids attorney who contacted GTRLC in May of 2003. Sevald was working to settle the estate of his father, Bill Sevald, who had purchased several large tracts of Northern Michigan land over the years.

“He just loved the land out there,” Mark Sevald said of his father. “Be it swamp or hill or river or whatever, he just loved owning it and walking on it, enjoying it.”

“As parcels keep being divided and subdivided, you just don’t find a lot of privately owned large parcels anymore. The last person I would have sold it to would have been a developer,” he said. “Those hills in there are just gorgeous.”

When it came time to sell some of his father’s holdings, Sevald researched land conservancies in the area and gave GTRLC a call. A conservation ethic runs deep in his family, and he felt it was important to make sure the land was protected.

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In a twist of perfect fate, GTRLC land protection specialist Todd Vigland was already working with officials in Forest Home Township as they attempted to create a public trail in the area. Sevald told Vigland he'd give him six months to find a way to purchase the land.

"He basically said we had first dibs on this thing if we could make it happen," Vigland said.

Vigland was thrilled to inform the folks at Forest Home Township. Sevald's property could tie together a few fragmented pieces of public land already owned by Antrim

County and the Village of Bellaire, creating the potential for a large contiguous piece of land for public recreation.

"It was just a wonderful opportunity at the perfect time. Here's a motivated seller who's also willing to give us some time to get something done," Vigland said. "Six months for a deal like this was pretty aggressive, but we didn't have to have the deal closed, we just needed to have a solid plan in place."

Talks began immediately with Forest Home Township. Supervisor Terry Smith was delighted to have GTRLC's assistance.

"When I realized that with their help we could acquire the land, then the smile came on my face," he said. "To know the land is available is one thing. But to have the Conservancy explain the mechanisms and say they were going to help us, that was just fantastic. We really formed a good working relationship."

It was determined that Antrim County should be invited into the discussion. Eventually, the idea of what would become Glacial Hills was born. After examining a few different scenarios, it was determined that Forest Home Township and Antrim County would apply for Michigan

Natural Resources Trust Fund grants in successive years for the eastern and western halves of the of the property.

Before all that, though, two longtime friends of GTRLC stepped in to be the heroes they've been so many times throughout GTRLC's history.

Sevald needed to settle his father's estate in a timely fashion and couldn't wait the years it might take to secure trust fund money. Enter Don and Jerry Oleson, who purchased Sevald's property and held it until after the trust fund process.

"That made the deal," Vigland said. "It made the whole thing possible."

In December of 2006, the trust fund board voted to grant Forest Home

Township \$213,000 to acquire the western 165 acres of the Sevald property. The following year, the trust fund granted Antrim County \$162,000 for the remaining 180 acres. After the money was received, the Olesons sold the land to the township and county for the same amount they purchased it for.

Due to appreciation, they sold it for less than fair market value. This discounted – or "bargain" – sale was used to account for some of the 25 percent local match required by the trust fund. GTRLC was instrumental in helping to raise the remaining money needed for a match.

It took more than six years after Sevald's call for the fully envisioned Glacial Hills Pathway and Natural Area to materialize. But for those involved, it was worth the wait.

"It was a long, drawn out procedure, due to a number of factors," Smith said. "But it was a fulfilling experience to see it come together."

The property now boasts more than 30 miles of word-class trails and is a popular spot for hikers and mountain bikers of all skill levels. It is managed by a group of representatives from all three municipalities and GTRLC.



PHOTO BY JOHN ROBERT WILLIAMS

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“With the shrinking amount of public land in the area, it’s important to get as much as you can under public control, but also have a plan to use it,” Smith said. “Having land that is public is great, but it doesn’t do much for people unless you have a plan to engage them, and the method that we see is most successful is a trail system.”

Smith, who uses the trail system himself on a regular basis, gets a smile on his face whenever he pulls into the parking lot.

“If I go out there right now, to any one of three different parking lots, I’m not going to be alone; there’s going to be people out there using it,” he said. “That’s when you feel that sense of satisfaction that it is meaningful – it’s been such a wonderful experience to see this grow and see it get used by people.”

