



Hickory Meadows.

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REC AUTHORITY

GTRLC's land protection team takes a lot of pride in problem solving. Snags pop up all the time in land protection deals, and it often requires a bit of creative thinking to satisfy all parties and get the deal to the finish line.

"If there's a will there's a way, and we always find a way," Chown said. "It's been the culture of our organization."

In November of 2004, as the nation's voters went to the ballot box to select a new president, voters in Traverse City and Garfield Township ushered in the culmination of a bold and groundbreaking plan to protect three separate but tremendously important parcels. GTRLC provided the spark for this initiative and continues to play an important role to this day.

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The City of Traverse City and Garfield Township Joint Recreational Authority was formed as a way to purchase and manage three properties – the historic barns at the Grand Traverse Commons, Hickory Meadows and the land once occupied by the Smith-Barney building along Grand Traverse Bay near the Open Space.

The story begins in 2002, when the Oleson family began talking to the city about rezoning what is now Hickory Meadows for higher density. The Olesons had used the 116-acre property as a hay farm for decades, but it also saw considerable use by hikers, birdwatchers and other people who wandered onto it from the neighboring Hickory Hills, a city-owned park, and the nearby Slabtown neighborhood.

Former Land
Protection
Director Matt
McDonough
began receiving
calls almost
immediately
from people who
were concerned
about losing that
open space to
development.

“People were
pretty upset,”
he said.
“Everyone in that
neighborhood
had been using
it as their park.”

For a variety of
reasons, a trust
fund grant for the property didn’t seem likely, McDonough said. There
was too much competition from properties with substantially more
recreation and conservation appeal. The trust fund board at that time
also had an appetite for substantially larger projects, particularly those
with a wilderness focus.

“You had to have big, sexy projects to be competitive,” he said. “There
was a ton of high-quality competition at that time.”

As McDonough was already looking into the Oleson property, he was
approached about the former Smith-Barney building on Grand Traverse
Bay along Grandview Parkway. Here was the last remaining privately
owned building from the Holiday Inn all the way to the Leelanau County
line, a vestige of the time when the entire shoreline was built up and
largely industrialized. The building was for sale, and numerous civic
leaders expressed a desire to see it removed.

And then there was a third piece – the historic barns at the Grand
Traverse Commons. These graceful old structures were used by staff
and patients at the former Traverse City State Hospital before it closed
for good in 1989. A redevelopment board tasked with determining what
would become of all of the former hospital’s buildings and grounds had
not yet figured out what would become of these relics, though everyone
knew they had tremendous potential.

The trust fund was almost certainly a no-go for
the barns and Smith-Barney, as its board has
always steered clear of providing money for
acquiring buildings. So, the question became:
How could GTRLC find a way to protect all three
properties? There was clear public desire to see
all three protected, and McDonough and others

at GRTLC were
eager to tackle
some projects in
the Traverse City
area after more
than a decade of
protecting mostly
rural land.

“This was an
opportunity to
have a big impact
in Traverse City,
which we really
hadn’t done up
to that point,
but we really
had no strategy,
no end game,”
McDonough said.
“There were a lot of
ideas, but nothing
was really gelling.”



The former Smith Barney building, near what is now the volleyball court parking lots, being demolished.

At some point during the process, Mike Groleau,
a member of the Commons redevelopment board,
insisted McDonough take a copy of a newly formed
law: The Recreational Authorities Act. Approved
in 2000, it allows two or more municipalities to
establish a joint authority for the acquisition,
operation and maintenance of parks and a host
of other recreational assets.

McDonough admits he didn’t pay much attention
to the document at first. He tossed it on his
desk, where it quickly became buried among the
paperwork of other pressing land projects. Then,
during one fateful day of head scratching as he
examined all three properties, he happened to
thumb through it.

“So here was a copy of the Rec Authorities Act,
literally just sitting on the corner of my desk for
weeks,” he said. “I picked it up one day and I read
through it, and I said ‘Holy cow, this could work
for all three.’”



With Chown's blessing, McDonough set up a meeting with Traverse City's then manager Richard Lewis, Garfield Township Supervisor Lee Wilson – as most of the barns and Oleson field lie within township boundaries – Chown and himself. The group decided to pursue the rec authority path, which would first require creation of the board, then a millage to fund acquisition of all three properties.

McDonough credits Lewis for insisting that there also be a second millage for ongoing operations once the properties were acquired and turned into parklands.

"We can do this, but if we do, we really need to have a way to maintain it," Lewis, now a city commissioner, recalled this year. "So we needed to ask the voters."

Both township and city officials quickly agreed to form the authority, and both millage questions were placed on the ballot for the November 2004 election. Had either millage failed, the authority would have automatically dissolved, Lewis said. Meanwhile, GTRLC secured purchase options on Smith-Barney and Oleson field in anticipation of the vote, and the Rec Authority secured one for the barns.



A friends group led by current GTRLC board member Jennifer Jaffe pounded the pavement in support of the millages. Law bars both nonprofits and governments from officially advocating for or against a ballot question, so the citizens group was tremendously important. McDonough and others spent their own personal time assisting the group, which put on a full court press in an effort to sway voters.

“The friends group had armies of people going door to door, they had full page newspaper ads with all of these people who endorsed it – which was a real who’s who of Traverse City – they had four supersized postcards, they had businesses with a great poster in their windows,” McDonough said. “The community really got behind it.”

Lewis, who up to that point had never placed a sign in his home’s lawn in support of any measure, did so for this initiative.

“I felt strongly enough that these three projects were in the best interest of our community, and I knew what the rec authority could accomplish later on,” he said. “It was my way to show my support – people knew I supported it, of course – but I was convinced that this was the way to go, and I wanted the public to know I supported it.”

“Without them, all of this would have been for naught,” he said. “That’s for certain.”

The results spoke for themselves. Both millages passed by overwhelming margins in both the city and township.

“They knocked it out of the park, they really did,” McDonough said. “Name another millage that passed by 70 or 80 percent. And this wasn’t even a renewal, this was something completely new.”

Lewis remains grateful to the residents of the township and city who got behind the proposal and made sure it passed.

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The millages funded demolition of Smith-Barney and repairs and cleanup at the barns. Removing Smith-Barney was a sweet spot, Lewis said, as it continued the community’s efforts to open up as much public space along the bay as possible. That effort received another massive boost a few years later when the neighboring Traverse City Light & Power bayside power plant came tumbling down.

“Over the years, folks had been encouraging the city to buy up all the private property it could,” Lewis said. “I think voters were very eager...to finalize the dream that people had. They knew the importance of open spaces.”

The Rec Authority continues to oversee all three properties. The barns are an active and vibrant wedding and event space, and Hickory Meadows is just as popular as ever.