

REFFITT NATURE PRESERVE

In those early days – and to an extent, still today – GTRLC had to convince the local community that land conservation was not at odds with business growth. An expansive nature preserve is in many ways just as important as a building that houses jobs, especially when it comes to quality of life, the region's tourism appeal and much more.



But it was a hard sell, especially in a hard-charging economic climate in which perceived success was so closely tied to the pace and scope of development.

“The feeling back then with a lot of people was that development and growth were good for the economy and good for the tax base, and that preservation would just slow that down,” Chown said. “So we had to start making a case that land preservation – not everything, but certainly the last of the least and the best of the rest – would make for an even stronger economy.”

Enter a successful local businessman who always knew there was room for both, and whose gift to GTRLC created an ecologically important preserve right in the heart of town.



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Paul Bennington (left) and Ron Reffitt review documents at the preserve.

When Ron Reffitt purchased a few hundred acres of land near Three Mile Road and began to develop Peninsula Business Park in the late 1980s, he knew there was something special about a large section that included sensitive wetlands and a winding stretch of Mitchell Creek, a major East Grand Traverse Bay tributary.

“With some imagination you could go in there and develop some things, but I just didn’t really feel it was proper,” he recalled this year. “I’ve always tried to do nice things with developments, and I didn’t want to go through there and destroy all of this natural beauty.”

Besides that, Reffitt said, he wanted something that would provide enjoyment for local residents and visitors.

“I just really felt it was time to share,” he said. “I wanted that to be available to anyone and everyone who would respect what’s in there.”

In 1992, Reffitt reached out to Chown with plans to donate the land to GTRLC. Chown was thrilled with the idea, and not only because of the land’s ecological importance. Reffitt was a very well-respected and successful businessman, and Chown hoped that his support of GTRLC – and of land protection – would send a clear message to the business community.

“He really understood that we need to balance; that we can’t just develop everything. We need to set aside areas too,” Chown said. “And he understood it from a businessman’s perspective – we didn’t want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg.”

Reffitt finalized his first 30-acre land gift in December of 1992, followed by another 22 acres in early 1993. He has since provided several more additions, and the preserve, named in honor of his parents, George and Ada Reffitt, is now more than 100 acres in size.

GTRLC’s protection of the Reffitt property dovetailed with a larger plan, spearheaded by then Grand Traverse County Drain Commissioner Maureen Kennedy Templeton, of protecting and improving the entire 15-square mile Mitchell Creek watershed.

Templeton, who now serves on GTRLC’s board, secured substantial grants from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality for both an analysis of the watershed and a plan to protect it. From those grant dollars, Templeton provided an \$80,000, three-year capacity grant to GTRLC so it could hire its first full-time land protection specialist, Paul Bennington.



From left to right, Paul Bennington, Ron Reffitt and Glen Chown at the dedication.

Although Bennington’s focus was within the Mitchell Creek watershed, he also helped Chown with projects throughout the GTRLC service area. This was a massive development, as Chown had handled all such projects himself for more than a year.

“It was a real turning point in our organization, as it was the beginning of having an actual land protection team,” he said. “Overnight, it doubled the number of land protection projects we could take on.”

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