

2020 ANNUAL REPORT



Dear Friends:

On behalf of The Conservation Fund and all of our Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) partners, I am pleased to share our 2020 Annual Report.

None of us need to be reminded that the last year was like no other. COVID-19 tested the adaptability of every organization in the Saginaw Bay region focused on conservation, community engagement, and sustainability. At the same time, we saw something amazing that validated all those efforts. As health orders limited indoor activities and gatherings, people turned to the outdoors.

Whether it was walking or biking on trails in the region, kayaking on one of our amazing waterways, fishing in the Saginaw Bay, hiking some of our beautiful conservation and park lands, or any number of other outdoor activities, people found that nature helped them cope with the unprecedented stresses of 2020. At WIN, we happily observed many of the projects that we supported over the years – river access sites, walking trails, public lands, and more – were used more than ever before.

Although the pandemic captured most of the headlines and concern, progress on several local environmental projects brought important, and sometimes unexpected, good news.

You'll read about one of those bits of good news in the annual report project focus. In late 2020, both the Flint River and the Shiawassee River Water Trails achieved a distinction that only a few rivers in the United States have attained: National Water Trail status from the U.S. National Park Service. The story of the Shiawassee River Water Trail illustrates how the stewardship vision of a few passionate individuals started a movement that now includes dozens of communities.

WIN has always advocated for the rivers in our watershed. We are proud to support the many groups along these waterways that pull together to highlight and strengthen the natural connection river communities have with each other. Rivers that were once only a point of interest have now become the focus of these communities and key to their economic growth.

While 2020 challenged us in many unexpected ways, it also reminded us that our communities and the Saginaw Bay Watershed are better when we work together.



Michael Kelly
The Conservation Fund



ON THE COVER: Recently recognized by the U.S. National Park Service, the Shiawassee National River Water Trail connects visitors to recreation and riverside communities as they enjoy four seasons of riparian beauty.

Trail Blazing

WIN projects reflect the vision, innovation, and collaboration that our diverse partners bring to both the Saginaw Bay Watershed and their communities. In unique ways, each project creates an energized force of caring individuals, committed experts, and private and governmental organizations. That is the first step in trail blazing for successful projects.

The projects that WIN sponsors start with the investment of a lot of time and hard work but often without much attention or funding. Determined and caring individuals drive these projects forward. In many cases, WIN grants help create a snowball effect of support by encouraging other funders and technical experts to join the effort.

Our 2020 grants focus on unique community-based efforts that create opportunities for environmental, economic, and social growth throughout the Saginaw Bay Watershed. WIN is proud to support the efforts of our watershed stewardship partners.

The projects – and champions – who received WIN grants in 2020 are:

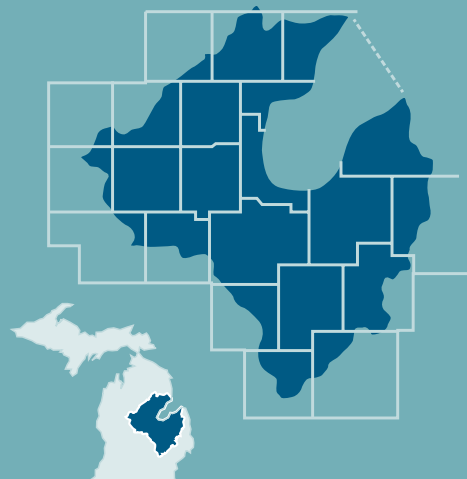
- **Chippewa River Erosion and Canoe Launch Project** – Isabella County Parks and Recreation
- **Curwood Castle Park Paddlecraft Landing** – Friends of the Shiawassee River
- **Davisburg Mill Pond Dam Removal and Restoration** – Oakland County Parks and Recreation and Springfield Charter Township
- **Lake Huron Forever** – Huron Pines
- **Lake Sturgeon Exhibit** – Chippewa Nature Center
- **Shiawassee National Water Trail Mile Marker Project** – Headwaters Trails, Inc.
- **Smiths Crossing Bridge Preservation and Fishing Access** – Great Lakes Bay Regional Trail
- **Virtual Outreach Programming** – The Little Forks Conservancy

Our Vision

As stewards of the Saginaw Bay Watershed, we value our shared, unique resources, and together we will balance economic, environmental, and social priorities to enhance the quality of life for this and future generations.

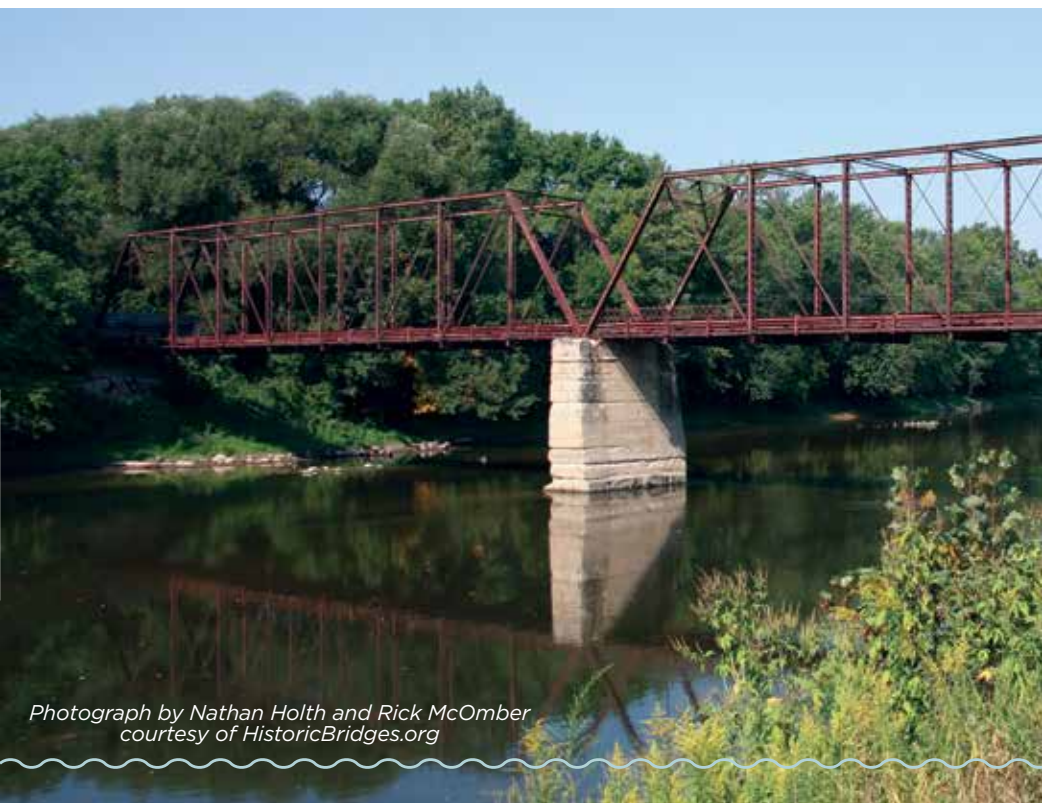
Where Is the Saginaw Bay Watershed?

The Saginaw Bay Watershed region contains rich resources in agriculture, forestry, industry, and recreation. As the state's largest watershed, it encompasses nearly 8,700 square miles in all or part of 22 counties in central Michigan. Approximately 15 percent of the state's waterways drain into the Saginaw Bay.



WIN's Guiding Principles

- Provide a pleasant and healthy environment
- Conserve historic, cultural, and natural resources
- Integrate economic prosperity, ecology, and aesthetics
- Use land and infrastructure effectively
- Continually evaluate and refine shared vision and goals



Photograph by Nathan Holth and Rick McOmber
courtesy of HistoricBridges.org



A Trail of Confluence

The Shiawassee River National Water Trail

The steady flow of the Shiawassee River has connected people in the region in a holistic way that few other natural resources have. Over the years, the Shiawassee has provided food and materials; moved people, ideas, and goods across miles; generated energy that fueled business and industry; and offered beauty, relaxation, and recreation. More recently, it has forged a common river identity through the creation of a water trail along the river's course. Years of dedicated work and collaboration to develop a full-fledged water trail culminated in 2020 when the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) granted its National Water Trail designation to the Shiawassee River Water Trail.

The Shiawassee River National Water Trail didn't start as a fully developed vision with launches, amenities, maps and signage, maintenance, and well-organized public events already in place. Its beginnings were much smaller and tied to local interests.

All along the river, organizations in different geographies advanced their own unique river stewardship objectives. Groups like Headwaters, Inc., Keepers of the Shiawassee River, and Friends of the Shiawassee River recognized the importance of the river to their communities and went to work in their

own locales. These grassroots efforts ranged from building kayak launches to removing dams. And many turned to Saginaw Bay WIN for project support and funding.

"Over the last 20 years, WIN has made significant investments in projects on the Shiawassee River. The restoration of the river's natural course through the removal of dams has been an important environmental focus. We've also funded smaller projects, like boat launches and mile markers, to enhance recreational opportunities on the river," says Mike Kelly, director, Great Lakes Office, The Conservation Fund. "I don't think many people realized that those first individual projects were setting the stage for a larger, highly collaborative effort to create the Shiawassee River Water Trail."

Making Headway

The simple truth is that very few communities in Michigan (or across the U.S. for that matter) have a spectacular natural asset like the Shiawassee River in their backyards. In the last two decades, the ones that do started focusing attention on their own banks as more and more improvements in water quality, river flow, and public access were made.



“Many communities have a long association with the Shiawassee River that has shifted over the years from agriculture and industry to recreation. Activities like fishing and boating are more popular now than ever,” says David Lossing, chair of the Shiawassee River Water Trail Coalition. “However, it’s the skyrocketing popularity of kayaking on the river that is bringing a new economic boost to these river towns and cities.”

Kayaking is one of the fastest growing sports in the U.S. In fact, one statistic indicates that the number of participants in the U.S. has grown from 6.1 million in 2006 to more than 16 million in 2019. Kayaking is relatively inexpensive and easily accessible to people with a wide range of skill levels.

That national trend is true for the Shiawassee River too. Paddlers from far and wide are discovering the river’s appeal. They join the fishers and birdwatchers who find plenty to enjoy on the water. Much of those quality experiences depend on the quality of the waterway.

Phil Hathaway, member of the Friends of the Shiawassee River, understands the appeal. “While on the river, you’re at the grace of this water body for a couple of hours. The view changes every 100 feet, so it’s always interesting. Being part of this dynamic force adds to your sense of well-being.”

Increased recreational use, enabled by the success of several projects on the Shiawassee, focused community attention on shared interests throughout

the region. Leaders from area nonprofits, businesses, and municipalities recognized the mutual benefits of working together to promote and protect the Shiawassee River. And the idea for an 88-mile long Shiawassee River Water Trail was born from that vision.

In 2017, the Shiawassee River Water Trail (SRWT) Coalition was formed after submission of the water trail application to the NPS. Made up of a variety of groups from different geographies – many that WIN has worked with on past investments – the Coalition’s objective was to pursue the National Water Trails System designation.



“The Coalition encouraged river communities to look at the Shiawassee River in its entirety. It was exciting to see how that collective attitude also celebrated each community’s distinct character, assets, values, and interests,” says Tom Cook, past president of the Friends of the Shiawassee River. “The Coalition championed the belief that the Shiawassee River ties our communities together. Even though each partner has a unique perspective, the success of the water trail reinforces all of our efforts.”

A Vital River Network

Becoming part of the National Water Trails System was more than a goal for the SRWT Coalition; it was a sign of commitment to river stewardship by communities that thrive along the Shiawassee River.

According to the NPS website, the National Water Trails System is a “network of water trails open to the public to explore and enjoy. They connect Americans to the nation’s waterways and strengthen the conservation and restoration of these waterways through mutual support and cooperation.”

To meet the requirements of the National Water Trails System, the Coalition conducted an inventory of the river’s assets against the Best Management Practices (BMP) defined by the NPS.



“Getting to the point where we could apply for the National Water Trails System designation took a lot of people’s hard work over several years. It was hard not to get impatient when progress slowed and to accept that change can only happen in small bites. WIN’s support was a catalyst that helped build the vital collaboration that led to the creation of the Shiawassee River National Water Trail.”

— David Lossing,
Shiawassee River Water Trail Coalition

Accomplished with WIN’s support and the hard work of the late Sara McDonnell Voyle from the University Outreach office of the University of Michigan – Flint and others, the inventory revealed a happy outcome.

“As we worked on the application, we quickly saw that almost all of the essential characteristics for a trail were already in place. We just needed to complete the plan and apply,” says Hathaway. “The NPS dedicated a staffer, Barbara Nelson-Jameson, to help us through the application process. She was deeply involved in working on the plan for an entire year. Her knowledge and influence made a big difference.”

In 2018, taking advantage of all the work put into writing the water trail plan, the SRWT Coalition applied for a state designation as a Michigan Water Trail along with its application to the NPS. The state recognition was conferred in December of that year. But the wait continued for the national recognition.

Although led by different organizations over the years, these completed projects reinforced BMP and led the way to a National Water Trail designation:

- Dam removals that replaced obsolete and dangerous dams with naturalized rock ramps
- River launches/ramps installed or repaired to add access points for paddlers and fishers
- River trail and water quality maintenance with devoted funds, time, and volunteers
- Shiawassee River Water Trail branded signage and maps, including smartphone apps, that display mileage, safety, and interpretative information
- Public information provided through a dedicated trail website and Facebook page

“Finally in the fall of 2020 – out of the blue, without fanfare, and after three years of waiting – we got the news that the NPS had designated the Shiawassee River Water Trail as part of the National Water Trails System,” says Lossing. “The Shiawassee River touches so many lives and ties the communities along its banks together in so many ways. This national designation recognizes those vital connections and encourages all of us to keep the vision alive for the future generations.”



The Shiawassee River National Water Trail

The Shiawassee River National Water Trail is an 88-mile long navigable waterway in central Michigan. It is one of 33 National Water Trails designated by the U.S. National Park Service, five of which are in Michigan, and one of eight state-designated water trails.

Paddlers who venture on the Shiawassee River National Water Trail will find a multitude of natural, historical, and cultural experiences. The speed and depth of the river creates an enjoyable water trail for all skill levels. Several launch sites are universally accessible, and many have public amenities and offer a doorway to the charming river communities along the Shiawassee.



Unlocking the Waterway

Dam removals have opened up several miles of the Shiawassee River for fish – and people – to travel the waters freely. The WIN-funded dam removal projects listed below helped eliminate safety risks, increase river function, stabilize river banks, increase aquatic life diversity, and enhance recreational opportunities.

- **Chesaning Dam** – Along with removal of the dam, the river restoration efforts brought ecologically sound solutions to restore the river to its original condition.
- **Shiatown Dam** – This project focused on stabilizing the river channel, providing a natural buffer against runoff, and enhancing the beauty, safety, and enjoyment of neighboring parks.
- **Corunna Dam** – Designed to include stabilization of the streambank, redirection of the river's flow, and installation of rock rapids, the restoration also met the City of Corunna's strategic community objectives.



WIN Grants That Helped Create a Water Trail

Saginaw Bay WIN is proud to support the diverse efforts by many dedicated individuals, organizations, and municipalities that culminated in the designation of the Shiawassee River National Water Trail. Here are some of the WIN-funded projects over the years that helped blaze the trail:

2008

Shiawassee River Restoration and Chesaning Dam Removal Project

2013

- Shiatown Dam Removal and Stream Restoration
- Five Launch Sites on the Shiawassee River Water Trail
- Showboat Trail Project in the Village of Chesaning

2016

- Shiawassee River Water Trail Map
- Shiawassee River Water Trail Coalition Action Plan

2018

- Shiawassee River Access at Fish Lake Road
- City of Vernon's Paddle Boat Launch

2009

- Shiawassee River Vernal Pool Restoration Project With the DeVries Nature Conservancy
- Signage Development and Installation on Miles 1-7 of the Shiawassee River Water Trail

2015

- Village of Byron River Access Facility
- Corunna Dam Removal and Access Improvement

2017

Riverwalk Community Mural in the City of Owosso

2020

- Curwood Castle Park Paddlecraft Landing
- Shiawassee River Water Trail Mile Marker Program



Hyfi Water Monitoring

The Shiawassee River continues to fuel innovation. Paddlers traveling along the Shiawassee River National Water Trail might see some high-tech equipment, if they look closely. Compact, wireless sensors have been installed underneath several bridges along the water trail by Hyfi of Ann Arbor. A provider of water data management systems, Hyfi was started by Ph.D. students at the University of Michigan. The sensors continuously monitor river water levels to give paddlers, fishers, communities, watershed management professionals, and emergency responders real-time data via computer and smartphone.



WIN Funding Process

WIN follows a unique, interactive process for awarding grant funding for projects and initiatives. Throughout the community-based review process, individuals from many organizations take part by reviewing project applications and offering their expertise on a variety of topics.

WIN awards grant funding twice each year; there are no grant deadlines. If you have a project to submit for funding consideration, contact WIN at (989) 892-9171 for an application.



About the Saginaw Bay Watershed

- Home to more than 90 fish species, 138 endangered or threatened species, and 1.4 million people
- Includes more than 175 inland lakes
- Contains about 7,000 miles of rivers and streams
- Path for migrating song birds and waterfowl on the Mississippi Flyway
- Significant agricultural and industrial resources supporting Michigan's economy

WIN Partners

A committed group of 12 foundations support WIN with financial contributions and technical support. They are:

- Bay Area Community Foundation
- Consumers Energy Foundation
- Cook Family Foundation
- Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
- The Dow Chemical Company Foundation
- Harry A. and Margaret D. Towsley Foundation
- Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation
- Midland Area Community Foundation
- Rollin M. Gerstacker Foundation
- S.C. Johnson Fund
- Saginaw Bay Foundation
- Saginaw Community Foundation

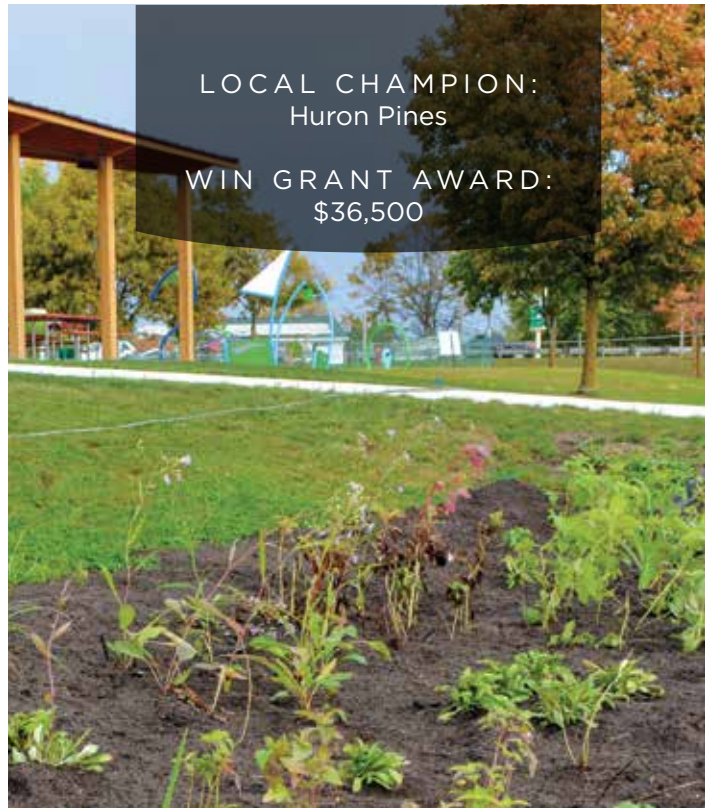
Looking to the Lake

Lake Huron Forever

Developed in 2019 by shoreline community foundations and conservation partners in the U.S. and Canada, the Lake Huron Forever initiative advances water quality protection and healthy sustainable communities on both sides of the lake. Lake Huron Forever brings Huron Pines and other organizations and municipalities together to facilitate sense-of-place programming and collaboration on water quality issues. Lake Huron Forever also promotes a shared Lake Huron identity. One exciting focus is the creation of bioswales for stormwater treatment in shoreline communities.

"Leveraging WNM's support helps bring other local and regional funders on board, which increases impact and adds value to the scope of work done by Huron Pines."

— Abigail Ertel, Community Program Lead, Huron Pines



Accessing More Enjoyment

Smiths Crossing Bridge Preservation and Fishing Access

The 2005 Vision of Green infrastructure plan and 2009 Great Lakes Bay Regional Trail study - initiatives supported by WIN in the past - both listed the scenic Smiths Crossing Bridge as the key connection for non-motorized trails between Midland and Saginaw counties. As one of only six surviving examples of a "multi-span highway truss" bridge in Michigan, the bridge, built on the Tittabawassee River in 1907, brings history and early 20th century aesthetics to people using the Iron Belle Trail. As part of the Smiths Crossing Bridge preservation project, a viable and safe overlook platform for fishing, as well as river viewing, will be built at the foot of the bridge. WIN's support will bring this outstanding example of stewardship in the Saginaw Bay Watershed within easy access of a proposed parking area and trailhead on the Iron Belle Trail.

"WNM is a good partner when it comes to trail and river access projects. I fished this area in my youth, and the fishing there today is just as fun and maybe more plentiful. Saginaw Bay WNM's support is helping add interest and additional recreation along this amazing hiking and biking trail."

— Robert Eggers, President/CEO, Spicer Group, Inc.



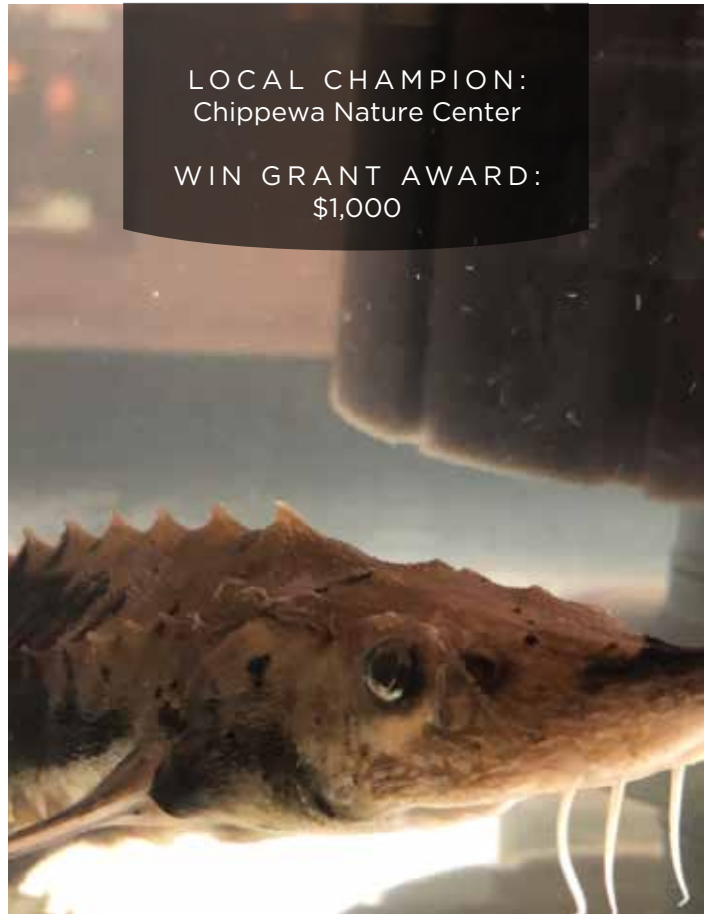
Exhibiting Restoration

CNC's Lake Sturgeon Exhibit

The Chippewa Nature Center created a free exhibit featuring a live lake sturgeon aquarium along with associated educational materials. In support of the Saginaw Bay Sturgeon Restoration project, the aquarium, located at the Visitor Center, gives the public – especially children – a chance to see a lake sturgeon, which has been an extremely rare sighting in the Saginaw Bay Watershed over the last century. When completed, the exhibit and educational materials will enhance learning opportunities about this fascinating prehistoric fish species and emphasize the importance of the restoration project in the region.

"Historically, our local rivers once teemed with sturgeon and we feel privileged to share this story of conservation and restoration in the Watershed. Were it not for the commitment of WNM and the many partners involved in the Sturgeon Restoration project, this live sturgeon exhibit would not be possible."

— Dennis Pilaske, Executive Director, Chippewa Nature Center



Pivoting for Stewardship

The Little Forks Conservancy Virtual Outreach Program

Like almost every organization in 2020, The Little Forks Conservancy had to redesign its outreach and create virtual programming because of COVID-19 restrictions. Little Forks quickly saw the need to pivot to tools it doesn't normally use to reach the community and share land trust success stories. To meet this new challenge, Little Forks is using a new high-quality camera and editing software purchased with WIN funding to produce human interest videos about landowners and fellow conservationists, as well as other types of virtual programming. The videos will feature informative and inspiring interviews with community conservationists to highlight their histories and share their relationships with nature.

"To achieve our vision of virtual outreach programming, we turned to WNM, and they were very receptive. Our short documentary-style pieces will feature easement landowners as they share their thoughts and motivations for eternally protecting their lands."

— Andrea Foster, Director of Programs & Partnerships,
The Little Forks Conservancy





Contact Us

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The Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network is facilitated through a partnership of The Dow Chemical Company Foundation, The Conservation Fund, and local and regional organizations dedicated to promoting the concepts of sustainability in the Saginaw Bay Watershed.



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