

# PROTECTING MINNESOTA'S NATURAL TREASURES

One of a series of case studies showing how Minnesota communities have used ecological information to protect their natural heritage

## Protecting Natural Areas and Farmland

CHISAGO AND WASHINGTON COUNTIES



### SUMMARY

Citizens teamed up with local governments, non-profit organizations, and agencies to create a planned network of natural areas, farmlands, and other open spaces called the Green Corridor Project. Using ecological and land use information, the group developed a shared vision for open space protection that is being realized with several local initiatives.

### Division of Ecological Services

The Ecological Services Division of the Minnesota DNR houses over 20 programs that collect and deliver ecological data on Minnesota's native plant and animal populations and their habitats. Four of these programs survey, map, interpret, and protect locations of significant native plant communities, rare plants, and rare animals. Local governments, landowners, and resource managers are among the many Minnesotans who have used this information to guide planning and land use policy and to protect some of the state's best natural areas. The four programs are:

- Minnesota County Biological Survey
- Natural Heritage and Nongame Research Program
- Nongame Wildlife Program
- Scientific and Natural Areas Program

These case studies provide detailed examples of how these programs work with partners to accomplish important conservation projects throughout the state.



### Green Corridors

Picture it. It's a network of wild lands, farms, and open spaces laced together across large expanses of two counties. These counties, Washington County and Chisago County, are not isolated from development. Rather, they lie directly in the path of booming expansion from a large metro area. Still, they have managed to retain these green corridors of public and private land where native plants and wildlife can thrive, and where family farms drive the seasons with their time-honored cycles of planting and harvesting. There is confidence among residents that these lands will forever remain as open space, because they have been provided with protection in the form of conservation easements and other legal tools chosen by landowners and by local communities for that purpose.

This is the shared vision of the future held by the many community groups, private organizations, public agencies — that is to say, the people — who are working together on an initiative that has come to be known simply as the “Green Corridor Project.”

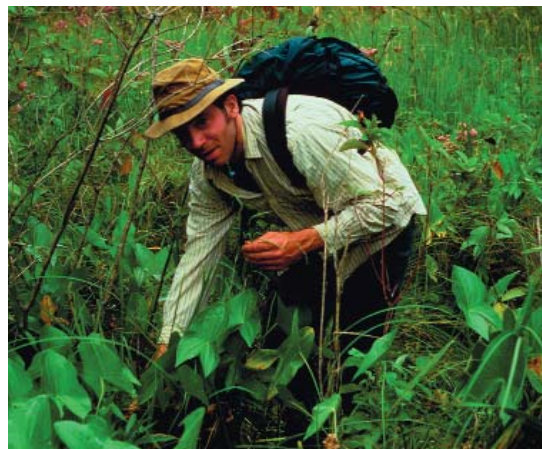
Primary collaborators in the Green Corridor Project include Washington County, Chisago County, 1000 Friends of Minnesota, Land Stewardship Project, Minnesota Farmer's Union, Minnesota Land Trust, Rural Community Initiative, and The Trust for Public Land.

Michael Pressman of the non-profit organization 1000 Friends of Minnesota was involved in the

project from the outset. He comments on the collaborative team that led the initiative. “People came to the table with different priorities — agriculture, for example, or water quality — but everyone worked to create a larger vision that would encompass all the concerns. We all agreed that citizen opinion should drive the process. The statewide organizations such as the Minnesota Land Trust and The Trust for Public Land did not come in with an agenda, but rather were there as a resource to help communities implement their own visions.”

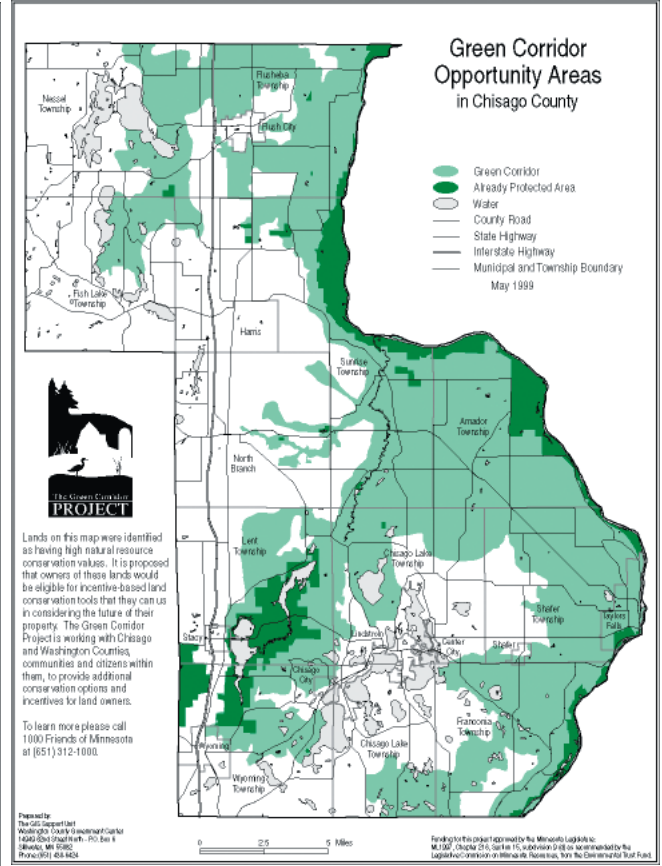
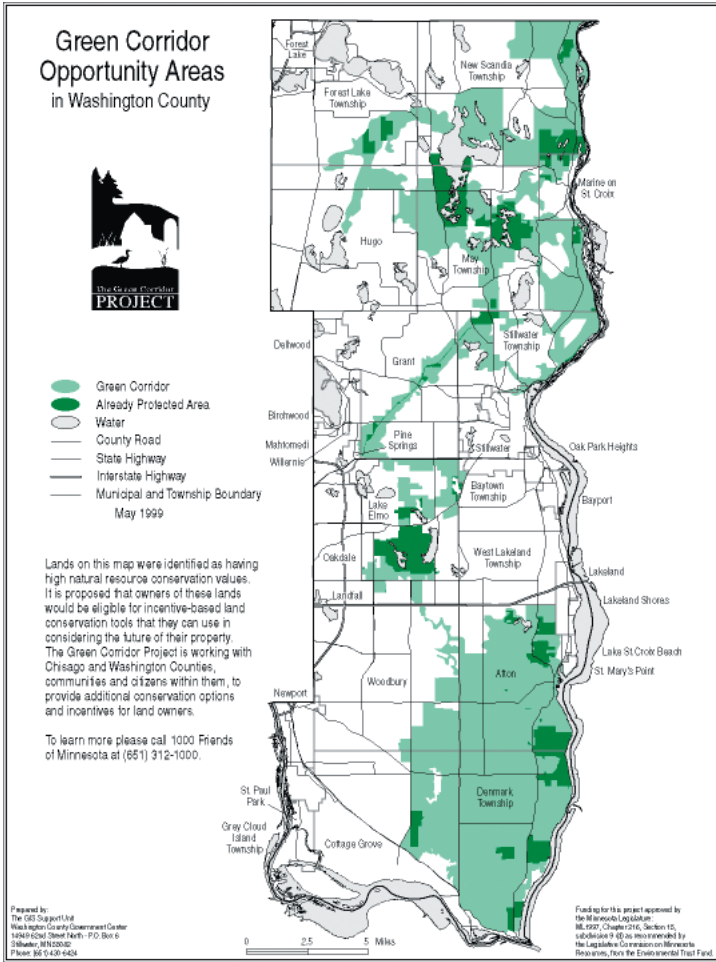
### A Response to Booming Population Growth

In recent years, the two counties have experienced astounding population growth and associated land use change. In the 20-year period from 1980-2000, the State Planning Department has documented population increases of 59.8% for Chisago County and 77.1% for Washington County.



MCBS Plant Ecologist Dan Wovcha examines a wet meadow native plant community, one of the increasingly rare vegetation types that occurs in the corridor.

Photo by Mike Lee, MN DNR



Lands on these maps were identified by the Green Corridor Project as having high natural resource conservation values. Criteria used to determine mapped areas included rare features data from the DNR as well as other data sources.

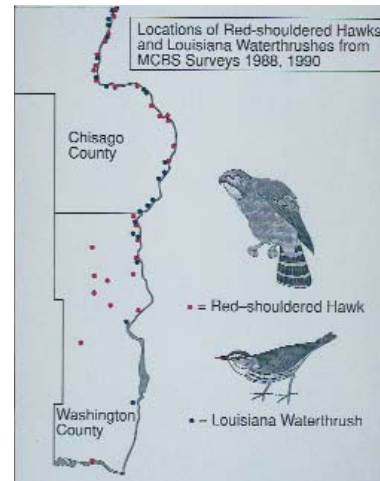
The Green Corridor Project partners are working on providing conservation options and incentives to landowners for land protection. These maps can be viewed on the Web site: [www.1000fom.org/conservation.htm#greencorridor](http://www.1000fom.org/conservation.htm#greencorridor).

It was in 1996, in response to these unprecedented rates of change, that the Land Stewardship Project and 1000 Friends of Minnesota initiated the Green Corridor Project. A grant from the Minnesota Legislature, as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCMR) helped support the first step in the process: the identification of “opportunity areas” where conservation measures might be focused.

**Ecological Information a Vital Tool**

In the criteria established for mapping, native plant communities mapped by the DNR’s Minnesota County Biological

Survey (MCBS) were assigned a ranking of “10” for conservation value, the highest possible rank. As richly detailed in the book *Minnesota’s St. Croix River Valley and Anoka Sandplain*, published by the University of MN Press, the two-county area is part of a larger ecological region. The book’s co-author and editor Dan Wovcha is a plant ecologist with the MCBS program. He describes the native vegetation that characterizes the region: “This area is a kind of meeting ground for the state’s northern and southern flora. You can find white pine-hardwood forest as well as oak savanna and prairie. Because of the St. Croix River, which borders these counties on the east, you also find rare communities such as



Map showing occurrences of two rare birds documented by the Minnesota County Biological Survey

seepage meadows, that are restricted here to river terraces.” Many of the remnant native plant communities that MCBS ecologists documented in the area are vulnerable to development and could benefit from protection efforts associated with the Green Corridor Project. “Seepage meadows are especially sensitive,” says Wovcha, “because they are fed by groundwater flows that can be easily disrupted by development that occurs quite a distance away.” Cold-water trout streams that are part of the same inter-related aquatic system provide important habitat for wildlife, including the Louisiana waterthrush, a rare songbird. The two counties are also home to other rare animal species, including the Blanding’s turtle and red-shouldered hawk.

Following mapping of opportunity areas, the next step in the Corridor Project was to assemble a “toolbox” of practical methods for protecting the land’s conservation

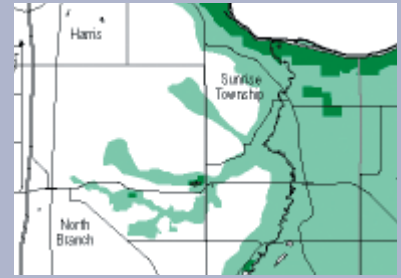
**There are a lot of people out there who really would rather not see their land developed, but they’re concerned about whether they’re leaving enough of a financial legacy for their children.**

**The land protection tools associated with the Green Corridor Project have the potential to do both; it can be a win-win situation.**

— Marion Heemsbergen, Chisago County Environmental Services Director

values. A primary information source for these protection tools was the book *Natural Areas: Protecting a Vital Community Asset; A Sourcebook for Minnesota Local Governments and Citizens*, available from the DNR. Four primary tools were selected: (1) Perpetual conservation easements, to be donated by landowners on a voluntary basis to a qualifying public agency or non-

## MCBS data help identify opportunities



Using local government plans, community input gathered through a series of public meetings, and natural resources data from a variety of sources including the Minnesota County Biological Survey (MCBS), criteria were established to evaluate land for inclusion in the corridor as an opportunity area. Maps were developed indicating areas with value for agriculture, natural habitat diversity, scenic quality, and environmental sensitivity (e.g. erosion-prone soils). Of particular interest were such lands that linked or enhanced existing protected sites such as parks or preserves. In the above map, most of the dark green areas are plant communities mapped by the MCBS.

profit organization; (2) Land acquisition by public agencies or nonprofit organizations, exclusively on a willing seller basis; (3) Purchase of development rights (PDR) from willing sellers, and; (4) Transfer of development rights (TDR) programs, by which landowners in designated preservation areas would be given “development right credits” which they could then sell to developers who wished to “spend” the

credits outside the corridor in designated areas better suited for higher density development. Open space initiatives using similar tools had been successful across the county, in places such as Montgomery County, Maryland and closer to home in Dunn Township, Wisconsin. But would it work here? Could the envisioned Green Corridor in Washington and Chisago Counties become a reality?



*The maple basswood forest native plant community occurs on cool moist slopes in the St. Croix River Valley.*

Photo by Dan Wovcha, MN DNR

## Making it Work

It looks promising, according to Matt Mega, present coordinator for the program at 1000 Friends of Minnesota. “There has been real progress,” says Mega. “All four tools are now in place and numerous conservation projects have been completed.” Both counties have taken official steps to protect land within the corridor, citing “preservation of rural character” as a primary objective. In February of 2000, Washington County adopted an ordinance authorizing a PDR program expressly to enable purchase of development rights “within and adjacent to” the designated Green Corridor. As of December, 2002, according to Jane Harper, Washington County’s Principal Planner, easements have been established on four parcels within the corridor as part of this program. In June of 2001, Chisago County adopted a TDR statute designating the mapped Green Corridor as the protection area from which development credits may be transferred to other areas. Chisago County has also created a Task Force to zero in on the most important areas and make recommendations for their protection. Presently under consideration by the task force is creation of an overlay zone that would set special protection standards (re. road set-backs, cell-tower routes, gravel pits) for a four-mile wide area that would run the length of the county’s eastern border along the St. Croix River.



Photo by Barb Delaney, MN DNR

*The Sunrise River and its associated wetlands are part of a green corridor opportunity area in Chisago County.*

To date, the Minnesota Land Trust has accepted donations of perpetual conservation easements on more than 1300 acres within the corridor. Land acquisitions are underway as well; for example, 118 acres are slated for acquisition in May Township using funding from Washington County, the Minnesota legislature, and the DNR Metro Greenways Program. The acquisitions will protect a number of sites documented by the MCBS program. “It will be an ongoing process,” says Mega.

To make the corridor function as a safe harbor for native plant communities and wildlife will require an understanding of

their needs. “We’re happy to provide land-owners in the corridor with information that can help,” says Hannah Dunevitz, a regional plant ecologist with the DNR’s **Natural Heritage and Nongame Research Program**. “Resource people available through the Ecological Services Division represent wide-ranging areas of expertise — and if we can’t provide the answers you’re seeking, we’ll refer you to someone who can.”

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