

# Big Rapids (MI) Pioneer News Article

## LAND CONSERVATION: A love for the land

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DOCKSIDE VIEW: John Bush, 54, of Big Rapids, and his mother, Emma Bush, 94, sit along a pond in their back yard. (Pioneer photo/Dana DeFever)

**BIG RAPIDS** — In John Bush's lifetime, he has watched rural landscapes transform into suburbia.

The 54-year-old Big Rapids man won't allow that same fate on his 173 acres — even after he passes away. Bush and his family hold the land — which has been passed down to him from his grandfather — close to their hearts.

"I knew it had meaning for them," Bush said. "They, as well as I, would feel better knowing it'll stay the way it is."

Bush, who said he's a cautious person, has never felt more confident than with his decision to place his land into a conservation easement, which would prevent any land development from happening on it in the future. The easement runs with the land, with the exception of eminent domain — the power in which the government can purchase the land if there is a greater public benefit for its use. The easement would then be vacated. Bush is working with the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy to create a land conservation easement on his 80- and 93-acre properties.

Chippewa Watershed Conservancy Executive Director Stan Lilley said many people want their land kept the same way it is now into the future, long after they have passed.

"It's gaining a lot of public attention, or at least has in the last five or 10 years," Lilley said. "It's certainly a growing movement at this point."

Lilley said there are more than 1,400 conservancies nationwide and more than 40 in the state, including the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy. The conservancy, which covers Mecosta, Isabella, Clare, Gratiot and Montcalm counties, has closed 24 easements — three of which are located in Mecosta Country.

The process of getting the easement includes an evaluation of the land by the conservancy, approval from the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy Board of Directors and an extensive documentation of the land, including soil and wildlife surveys. The land also is monitored by the conservancy once a year.

Lilley said it is important that the organization is ahead of the curve and can preserve natural areas and open space for future generations as the area continues to grow, unlike some metropolitan areas down state that have little or no natural land.

As a child, Bush lived on 230 acres of rural land on a dead-end gravel road. He enjoyed the outdoors and would spend his days exploring the land with his dog by his side, fishing, hunting and admiring nature around him.

"Everywhere I could walk was my playground," he said.

As he's grown up, Bush will still occasionally walk the land, collecting firewood and planting trees. However, he doesn't get out as much as he used to, with his everyday life tying him up.

Bush's land consists of rolling hills, a couple of ponds, a marsh, a field of flowers that blooms in the summer, two red pine forests that his father and mother both planted and a trout stream that flows through it. The acreage also is home to numerous wildlife, including deer, beavers and sandhill cranes.

When Bush was younger, his parents sold three separate 40-acre parcels of land and over the years he has seen that land transform from its natural condition to residential housing. He felt it would only get worse as the years went on.

Bush, who has no children to keep the land's ownership in the family, said the easement was the next best way to preserve the land when he's gone.

However, Bush isn't the only one considering a conservation easement. His neighbors, Carol and Ken Baker, also are planning to do the same with their 40 acres that bump up against Bush's land.

Carol Baker said she has an emotional bond with the land. Baker is the third generation of her family to own the land, which comes with it a lot of family history and memories that she cherishes.

Growing up, Baker said she also explored the land, always finding new wildlife, plants or aspects of the land she didn't see before.

"It's an experience a lot of kids never get. I would like to pass that appreciation along (to my grandchildren)," she said.

Earlier this summer, Bush hosted a meeting with the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy, inviting his neighbors to attend in an effort to inform them about the issue. Lilley said a few neighbors expressed interest in following Bush's lead.

"I applaud John for that, but even more so he's really taken the bull by the horns and invited his neighbors in the process," Lilley said.

People who enter into conservation easements may be protecting the land's natural value, Lilley said, but are at the same time reducing the monetary value of their properties. The land can not be split and sold and no development can ever take place on it, he said.

Lilley said as part of the easement, properties may have reductions in property taxes. Tax breaks aren't usually the reason most landowners enter into an easement.

"For me it is about the land and not an interest in being noble," Bush said.

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