



**IN CONTEXT: THE SIXTY-YEAR EFFORT TO  
EXPAND SAUGATUCK DUNES STATE PARK**



**SAUGATUCK**  
DUNES COASTAL ALLIANCE



**OUR GEOGRAPHY IS OUR ECONOMY**

Keep It Wild  
Keep It Whole  
Make It Grow

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## THE SIXTY-YEAR-OLD VISION TO EXPAND SAUGATUCK DUNES STATE PARK

Establishing and expanding Saugatuck Dunes State Park to protect the Saugatuck Dunes has been a 60-year collaborative effort. This effort is written into our community values. It is part of our regional economics. It has the endorsements of Governor William Milliken, Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell, Representative Peter Hoekstra, Senator Carl Levin, Hope College, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and pretty much every civic group and neighborhood association in Saugatuck-Douglas. Our community has invested tens of millions of dollars in the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area, Tallmadge Woods and Saugatuck Dunes State Park.

In 1957 the National Park Service did a survey of potential park sites along Lake Michigan. The Park Service study wrote:

*“By virtue of its fine beaches and scenic hinterlands, Saugatuck has a high public use value.... Immediate steps should be taken to safeguard these values in order to meet the recreation demands of this region.”*

Saugatuck Dunes State Park grew out of the first major project of the Natural Areas Conservancy of West Michigan. In **1977** NACOWMI acquired a 300-acre parcel, known as the Luther-Uhl property, adjacent to the de facto State Park near Saugatuck; de facto because the state had just acquired 550 acres from the Augustinian Seminary that was housed in the Felt Mansion property. The State Department of Corrections kept 40 acres for a prison and gave the remaining land to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. The DNR had not yet developed a park plan for this land.

NACOWMI is now the Land Conservancy of West Michigan which has helped with a number of projects in the Saugatuck area including the McEnroe conservation easement, the Shorewood conservation easement, the Presbyterian Camp conservation easement, and the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area.

Following acquisition, NACOWMI advocated for the Luther-Uhl land to be protected as a natural area for scientific study. However, when the DNR unveiled their state park plan for Saugatuck, it called for a 1,500 car parking lot on the beach and an off-road vehicle area in the heart of what people had just worked so hard to protect. The local response was immediate and unanimously negative.

To the DNR's credit they withdrew the plan and allowed the formation of a citizen's advisory committee to draft a master plan for Saugatuck Dunes State Park. This was the first time a citizens' advisory committee was entrusted to create a State Park Master Plan.

The proposed plan the Advisory committee drafted took nearly two years and countless hours of committee work. Their plan, which called for low-impact nature study and no overnight camping – a very rare prohibition in the state park system -- was unanimously approved by the natural resource commission.

The Master Plan also included detailed expansion plans that included acquiring the Denison property, then the McClendon or Singapore Dunes property, now the Jeff & Peg Padnos or North Shore Property. The expansion plans called for an expanded natural area and a designated historic site where the buried ghost town of Singapore lies.



That plan was unanimously approved by the Natural Resources Commission in **January 1982**.

It required until October of 1988 for the Natural Area - -the Luther-Uhl property - to be legally designated a Natural Area. It took those six additional years for citizens working with the conservancy community and the DNR and state government to make sure this land was truly protected - the way local citizens wanted it protected.

Just thirteen years later, **in 2001**, Laketown Township and the City of Holland submitted two separate and competing plans for a water treatment facility to be constructed in the heart of Saugatuck Dunes State Park. Once again, community reaction was immediate and nearly unanimously negative. Hundreds of local and regional park-users sent letters of protest to the DNR. A local organization, Concerned Citizens for Saugatuck Dunes State Park (CCSDSP), formed to protect the State Park and to advocate for its expansion. After fighting the proposed water treatment plant for nearly three years, CCSDSP was successful - the DNR denied the requests of Holland and Laketown Township.

**2003 marked a dramatic upswing in local and regional efforts to protect the lakeshore and dunes, and to expand Saugatuck Dunes State Park.**

**The West Michigan Strategic Alliance**, in their **November 2003** Green Infrastructure Task Force Final Report, cited the **Coastal Dune System and Interdunal Wetlands of the Saugatuck Dunes as a priority ecosystem for preservation. The West Michigan Strategic Alliance, in their November 2003 Green Infrastructure Task Force Final Report, cited that preservation and protection of the Coastal Dune System and Interdunal Wetlands of the Saugatuck Dunes as a key regional priority.**

The Department of Natural Resources received over 100 individual letters in **January 2004** supporting a proposed expansion of the Saugatuck Dunes State Park to include the former Denison property as part of the DNR's Land Consolidation Strategy.

The DNR study of the Kalamazoo River from **September 2005** offers many 'Management Options' which **support a Natural River Designation for the Mouth segment of the Kalamazoo River.**

The communities of Saugatuck, Douglas and Saugatuck Township came together in a series of meetings **between 2003 and 2005** to discuss and debate the land use issues that would determine future development decisions. A significant number of citizens contributed to the process by attending two townhall-style meetings, filling out a survey sent to every home in the tri-communities (with a 40+% return rate - unheard of for a survey that required an hour to complete), and by participating in interviews and other meetings. The Master Plan cost nearly \$100,000, was a two-year process, and collectively required well over 10,000 work hours for its creation. The Master Plan was unanimously approved by Saugatuck, Douglas and Saugatuck Township, as well as by the Allegan County Commissioners.

**The Tri-Community Master Plan** clearly states what the people of the Tri-Communities regard as being in the highest public interest: protection and acquisition of the former Denison property, now the Jeff & Peg Padnos Property.

**"Public acquisition of the Denison property on both sides of the Kalamazoo River is the top priority for the Tri-Communities." Pg 13-2**

**“The northwest corner of the Township**, along with the most of the land in Saugatuck west of the Kalamazoo lake should be preserved for public open space and the portion that remains in private ownership **should be maintained for low intensity uses (like the art colony and church camp).**” Pg 10-7

“Although waterfront lands have a high revenue generating potential, a major attraction of **both the Lake Michigan and Kalamazoo River waterfronts is their scenic, natural shorelines composed of forested sand dunes and large wetland areas. Should these natural areas be greatly damaged or destroyed through inappropriate development, then the “goose that laid the golden egg” will be dead.**” Pg 8-2

“The Plan seeks to define a balance between competing uses. **It places protection of the natural environment as first and foremost in making future land use decisions along the Lake Michigan and Kalamazoo River waterfronts.**” Pg 8-2

**“Sensitive dune ecosystems also occur in the dune areas on either side of the Kalamazoo River mouth at Lake Michigan. This area is planned for protection but details have yet to be finalized.”** Pg 8-6

**“Several vistas have public values that deserve protection. These include the entry into and exit from Lake Michigan on the Kalamazoo River**, the view from Mount Baldhead, the view of the Kalamazoo River from both ends, and approaches to the Kalamazoo River Bridge.” Pg 8-26

It was at a great cost that the people of the Tri-Communities have followed through with the vision described in the Tri-Community Plan:

- Establishing the R-4 Lakeshore Open Space Zoned District in **2006** - -This included the river mouth, Ox-Bow, Tallmadge Woods, and the former Denison property. (since revoked due to a settlement in a Federal lawsuit filed by Aubrey McClendon’s Singapore Dunes LLC [2012])
- Restricting Presbyterian Camp as ‘Camp’ with single family residences as ‘special use only’ in **2005** (since reinterpreted to allow single family residences)
- Placing Tallmadge Woods into a conservation easement in **2007**
- Assisting in the \$20 million public acquisition of the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area in **2010**
- The voters of Saugatuck Township even passed a millage in **May 2010** to tax themselves in order to better support protections on local zoning calling for protection of the natural resources. As Township Trustee Jim Hanson wrote:

“Today, the pressure the Township faces in maintaining its rules, regulations and ordinances is great. **The Township wants to defend the land use goals in the 2005 Tri-Community Plan** and the equitable treatment of all landowners. The only alternative to this defense is to abandon those good public policy goals that most residents of the area support, and allow the litigator with the deepest pockets to win every time.”

The Saugatuck Dunes Coastal Alliance formed in **2007**. Their mission is to implement many of the goals and policies articulated in the Tri-Community Master Plan. The Coastal Alliance is a coalition of home owners' associations, neighborhood groups, the local chapter of the League of Women's Voters, environmental groups, and other civic organizations. Partner organizations of the Coastal Alliance include: the West Michigan Environmental Action Council, the Michigan League of Conservation Voters, the Michigan Environmental Council, the Environmental Law & Policy Center, the Michigan Historic Preservation Network, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and others.

**Representative Peter Hoekstra** released a statement to the media in **2007** showing his support for expanding Saugatuck Dunes State Park:

*"I write today to add my name to the list of supporters of the Saugatuck Dunes Coastal Alliance's efforts to preserve and protect the Saugatuck Dunes coastal region in the Kalamazoo River Watershed.*

*It is obvious that the Saugatuck community has placed a high priority on the preservation of the former Denison property."*

**In 2008, the West Michigan Strategic Alliance** reiterated its support of protecting the Saugatuck Dunes with the following statement released to the media:

*"We believe it is essential from a regional perspective to approach opportunities such as the protection of the former Denison property. This is not simply a Saugatuck area issue, nor a Lakeshore issue – this is a critical issue that impacts all the residents who call West Michigan home."*

The **October 2009 Michigan Department of Natural Resources** General Management Plan for the Saugatuck Dunes State Park called for expanding the park to include much of the Singapore Dunes acreage stating:

*"Proposed Future Expansion: The Planning Team recommends acquisition of those properties within the 2004 NRC Boundary as shown on the map. Community leaders, activist groups and local neighbors have pursued a variety of strategies to preserve the natural character of the properties in the area."*

**In 2009**, the 177-acre Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area, between Saugatuck's Oval Beach and the Kalamazoo River mouth, was acquired from Aubrey McClendon for \$20 million. Below are excerpts from two important letters sent to the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Board in support of the acquisition:

**Governor William Milliken** wrote:

*"As a state, we need to preserve as much of the Saugatuck Dunes area as we can. It makes good economic sense in terms of tourism and recreation. And it is the right thing to do for our natural resources. The ecological significance of the Saugatuck Dunes has been detailed in an array of scientific studies and resource management plans. It has also filled the field notes of local birders with more than 170 species of birds, including breeding and nesting pairs of the Michigan-endangered Prairie Warbler.*

*The historic, cultural, ecological, recreational resources of this land provide unique educational opportunities and will collectively drive a regional economy that is both durable and sustainable.”*

**Congressman Vern Ehlers** wrote:

*“This acquisition would be an essential first step in linking Saugatuck’s Oval Beach to the Saugatuck Dunes State Park Natural Area – a plan that’s been in the works for over fifty years.”*

In a letter to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in **2009**, **Michigan Senator Patricia Birkholz** wrote:

*“The City of Saugatuck, Saugatuck Township and the City of the Village of Douglas, have worked collaboratively for many years to preserve and maintain this historic, cultural and environmental treasure. Protecting and preserving Michigan’s aquatic and sand dune resources, as well as the historic and cultural assets, which are like no other in the nation, has long been the focus of this coalition of communities. They are committed to protecting our natural, cultural and historical heritage of the dunes for the use and enjoyment of current and future generations.”*

**Lana Pollack, former Chair of the Natural Resources Trust Fund Board**, best explained and articulated the high public interest, both locally and statewide, in protecting the Saugatuck area’s lakeshore and dunelands, when she wrote the following to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in **2010** (This letter came just following Pollack’s support of a \$10.5 million grant for the acquisition of the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area):

*“My own valuation of this area is best demonstrated by the recent MNRTF decision to grant \$10.5 million to protect a portion of the land now representing a significant part of this application. The grant approved in December 2009 is one of the largest MNRTF has ever made and is a particularly impressive commitment given the intense competition from other worthy applicants that year.”*

*The designation that we now seek from the National Trust for Historic Preservation is needed because of the threat of development on the parcel immediately north of the Saugatuck Harbor Natural Area. The current proposal calls for a major marina development with a suggested nine story hotel, restaurants, retail businesses as well as a 70 slip marina near the site of the buried ghost town of Singapore – all prohibited by current zoning. If completed, the proposed development’s impact on MNRTF’s investment of \$10.5 million still leaves me concerned that our public investment may become mostly the enhanced viewscape for a commercial development.*

*Fortunately, the history of preservation of the Saugatuck Dunes is strong. In the 1940’s the State of Michigan looked at constructing a State Park at the mouth of the Kalamazoo River. In the 1950’s the National Park Service surveyed the*

*Saugatuck Dunes for its potential as a National Lakeshore. In the 1980's area citizens worked together to draft the Master Plan for the Saugatuck Dunes State Park and Natural Area. This followed the initial plan from the state DNR that called for paved roads and a parking lot on the beach, which was met with near unanimous resistance. Since that time several additional key parcels have been placed into conservation easements or turned into parks; historic buildings have been acquired by the local Historical Society; and progressive planning has established a Lakeshore Open Space District designed to better protect the historic and ecological treasures along the river and lakeshore.*

*It was with this in mind – the long and determinedly fought history of protecting the Saugatuck Dunes – that I felt comfortable urging MNRTF to award the \$10.5 million grant. The tenacious commitment of the local community to protect the Saugatuck Dunes' many historic, cultural and ecological resources ultimately held more sway than the threat of a developer's legal war chest to overturn protective zoning controls."*

**On May 19, 2010, The National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Saugatuck Dunes to its 2010 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.** In their international press release they wrote:

*"Saugatuck Dunes is a remarkable, untouched, sustainable cultural landscape, one that has survived despite the aggressive development that has scarred other areas along Michigan's coastline," said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.*

*Even with its many attractions, Saugatuck has managed to maintain an authentic small town feeling, rare among resort communities today."*

**In 2012** historians and biologists wrote a series of letters to the Saugatuck Township Planning Commission and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources reminding them of the vital historical and ecological resources found in the Saugatuck Dunes:

**Professor Lissa Leege** has studied the wetlands found in the Saugatuck Dunes for over twenty years. In her **December 15, 2012** letter to the Saugatuck Township Planning Commission and the DEQ, she writes:

*"The Saugatuck Dunes from the state park to the Kalamazoo River are an incredible national treasure. As a sand dune researcher, I have worked with experts around the world and can state with confidence that this is a remarkable intact and special freshwater dune system, unmatched in its size and biodiversity, and ecologically distinct even from protected dunes further north (Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore) and south (Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore)."*

**Professor Peter Murphy** has sent over 1,500 students into the Saugatuck Dunes and has overseen seven dissertations specific to the Saugatuck Dunes. Professor Murphy has been intimately familiar with the dunes and wetlands in question for more than forty years.



Professor Murphy's letter of **October 1, 2012** to the Saugatuck Planning Commission and DEQ begins by stating:

*"At the outset, I wish to state that I believe the proposed development of the sand dune tract to the south of Saugatuck Dunes State Park is entirely inconsistent with the public interest. In my opinion, it would be damaging not only to one of the State's – and indeed the World's – most important and famous natural ecosystems, but it would also harm the high standing of our State with regard to the many tourists and other visitors who come to our region to enjoy nature at its finest and to experience natural features unavailable elsewhere. "*

**The Saugatuck Douglas Historical Society**, a civic organization with over 600 active members, issued the following statement **in 2012** regarding the potential damage by development to historic resources in our community:

*"The built environments of our towns and the natural lands, vistas, and historic and archeological sites of the Lake Michigan lakeshore and along the Kalamazoo River are irreplaceable assets. They are vital to the quality of the community's cultural life as well as its economy. **The Society asserts that any development that devalues the historic townscape, landscape or view sheds, or diminishes our ability to understand or commemorate our varied history, should be considered a "taking" from the people of the region.***

*The Society urges local, state and federal governments to recognize the significance of these unique historical assets and to protect them from development or activities that would alter the area's character or appearance."*

**In fall of 2014**, the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Board received over 2,000 letters of support for expanding Saugatuck Dunes States Park and acquiring the McClendon property. McClendon lawyers notified the Trust Fund, the day before the December 2014 board meeting, that the property was no longer for sale.

Here are excerpts from just a handful of those letters.

From the **Saugatuck Douglas Convention and Visitors Bureau**:

*"Acquisition of this property will play a key role in enhancing economic development for our region through tourism by attracting many new visitors to the West Michigan lakeshore."*

From **Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell**:

*"Public spaces along the Lake Michigan shoreline provide measurable benefits to the quality of life of Grand Rapidsians. Proximity to these lakeshore public spaces is a feature Grand Rapids uses to attract and retain talent for our largest employers. **The City of Grand Rapids is excited to know that the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund is considering the acquisition of 150 acres, of the total 315 acre Singapore Dunes, LLC property. We applaud this initial step and***

*encourage the state to begin planning to acquire the entire 315 acres.*

*West Michigan 's undeveloped dunes are to Lansing, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids and Chicago as the Marin Headlands are to San Francisco, as the San Juan Islands are to Seattle, as Cape Cod is to Boston. **This property could be an open, accessible preserve that serves as glue for an engaged, well-educated work force and millions of tourist dollars annually. Embodied in this land acquisition is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to use innovative, cutting-edge conservation development practices integrated with water trails, and ecosystems protection.***

**From The National Parks Conservation Association:**

*"On behalf of the 880,000 members of the National Parks Conservation Association, including our 30,000 in Michigan...*

*NPCA supports the Michigan DNR request to the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund to purchase 150 acres of the Singapore Dunes LLC property. And we encourage the Department of Natural Resources and the Natural Resources Trust Fund Board to look for further opportunities and to pursue whatever resources are available to purchase the entire 315 acres of this natural and culturally important landscape."*

**From Senator Carl Levin:**

*"This land acquisition would expand Saugatuck Dunes State Park, preserving this priceless jewel for posterity."*

Nearly 45% of the Saugatuck High School Class of 2017 wrote letters supporting the expansion of Saugatuck Dunes State Park. Below is an excerpt from **Lena Rose Burdick's** letter:

*"There is nothing wrong with shoreline resorts or towns built close to the water line, I'm glad they're there! However, **keeping the expanse we have here undeveloped**, or even opening it up to light camping, becomes increasingly important as these environments become more and more rare.*

*It's important to protect this land in the Saugatuck area, not because land development is bad, but because the lack of it has become so rare."*

**In 2016**, Saugatuck, Douglas, and Saugatuck Township unanimously approved the updated Tri-Community Master Plan. It is significant to see that the following remains the top priority for the Tri-Community:

***"Public acquisition of the Denison property on both sides of the Kalamazoo River is the top priority for the Tri-Communities." Pg 13-2***

The Coastal Alliance is a 501c3 non-profit organization whose mission is to preserve and promote the Saugatuck Dunes coastal region's open spaces, historic sites, farmlands, important ecosystems, cultural richness and economic vitality.

The Coastal Alliance formed in 2007 as a proactive wise land-use organization in the face of the eminent threat of inappropriate and out-of-scale development on Lake Michigan's last remaining undeveloped river mouth and duneland.

Since 2007 our community has faced a series of lawsuits aimed at eliminating locally-determined zoning. The Coastal Alliance has worked with various law firms, planning experts, historians, biologists, scientists, economists, activists, civic groups and homeowners associations, national organizations, elected officials, and many others to ensure the river mouth, historic sites, and sand dunes remain protected.

In 2011 the National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the Saugatuck Dunes One of America's 11 Most Endangered Places, for which they were threatened with a defamation lawsuit.

Please contribute to the Coastal Alliance so that we can continue the necessary work protecting the Saugatuck Dunes. And please consider a direct donation for the Deam Family Series on the Arts & the Environment so we can continue bringing artist-activists such as Janisse Ray and Richard Shaw, to Saugatuck.

**[www.saugatuckdunescoastalalliance.com](http://www.saugatuckdunescoastalalliance.com)**

*“As a state, we need to preserve as much of the Saugatuck Dunes area as we can. It makes good economic sense in terms of tourism and recreation. And it is the right thing to do for our natural resources. The ecological significance of the Saugatuck Dunes has been detailed in an array of scientific studies and resource management plans. It has also filled the field notes of local birders with more than 170 species of birds, including breeding and nesting pairs of the Michigan-endangered Prairie Warbler.*

*The historic, cultural, ecological, recreational resources of this land provide unique educational opportunities and will collectively drive a regional economy that is both durable and sustainable.”*

**GOVERNOR WILLIAM MILLIKEN**



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