





Dear Friends,

The Saginaw Bay Watershed. It's the geographic region we have focused on since our inception. But our focus is about much more than the geography. The more than 7,000 miles of streams and rivers and the 8,700 square miles of terrain that drain to Saginaw Bay inextricably link us together as a watershed community. The Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) works across that community to support projects, invest in ideas, and encourage the concept of sustainability – that holistic approach that affirms conservation and economic development can exist hand-in-hand.

This year's annual report is a testament to the communities and organizations that have shown a deep understanding of sustainability. The projects demonstrate a commitment to conservation and restoration, while also building models of positive impact on the economy, education, and tourism.

In these pages, you'll see how communities are working to enhance their riverfronts and provide access to our key water resources. In addition, the report spotlights new projects that connect communities, bring a conservation ethic to schools, and support economic development that includes a focus on nature-based recreation.

Along with our grant making programs and technical support initiatives, we held our third State of the Bay conference in 2022, which was attended by more than 200 people. At the conference, we proudly highlighted all the impressive work that diverse and dedicated organizations are doing around the watershed. We'll be holding this event again in 2024, so be sure to make space on your calendar to join us. A special thank you to all our partners who make the event a biennial success.

In closing, I want to thank our funding network, committee members, partner organizations, grant recipients, and volunteers. WIN could not be successful without you. As we celebrate the incredible projects of 2022, we look forward to the exciting, new projects and ideas that 2023 will bring us in this great watershed.



Michael Kelly  
The Conservation Fund



ON THE COVER: Nelson Woods is the Little Forks Conservancy's newest nature preserve along the Tittabawassee River within the City of Midland and Homer Township, Midland County. This 106-acre property has mature woods, vernal pools, an open field and a river floodplain. The photo on the cover, provided by Little Forks Conservancy, highlights the mature hardwood forest of maples, oaks and beeches with a trail that the previous owner had used to enjoy the property and harvest sap for maple syrup.

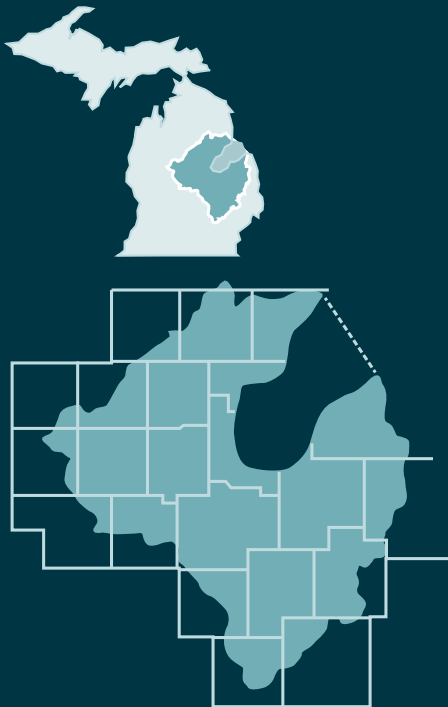
## WIN Partners

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

## 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.



# Growing With the Flow

“Growing with the flow” is a fun play on words. But when it comes down to it, it’s an apt description of the ideas that Saginaw Bay WIN supports through our grant program. From out-of-the-box thinking to the continuation of successful endeavors, WIN-funded projects are most successful when they encourage a natural flow of collaboration, dedication, expertise, and heart.

Not surprisingly, the projects WIN sponsors are ones where growth and sustainability are at the forefront. Those projects are led and driven by determined and caring individuals who believe in making a difference in the environment and their communities. And WIN is there with early funding to help strengthen the flow of diverse and innovative projects.

Our 2022 grants focus on efforts – both new and continuing – that build environmental, economic, and social growth throughout our watershed communities. WIN is proud to support organizations that are determined to “grow with the flow” of innovation and commitment that improves and protects the Saginaw Bay Watershed.

## The 2022 Saginaw Bay WIN grants were awarded to the following projects:

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Economic Impact of Nature-Based Recreation and Professional Bass Fishing in Bay City – *The Conservation Fund and Saginaw Bay WIN*

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Emerson Park Riverfront Renovation – *City of Midland Parks and Recreation*

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Finn Road Park and Lake Access Improvement Project – *Hampton Charter Township*

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Nelson Woods Acquisition and Improvement Project – *Little Forks Conservancy*

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Schoolyard Habitat Grants – *Chippewa Nature Center*

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Shiawassee River Water Trail Updated Development/Capital Improvement Plan – *Shiawassee River Water Trail Coalition*

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Smith Park Fishing Access – *City of Essexville*

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## 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







# TIF Talk for Funding

## Shiawassee River Water Trail Coalition's Updated Development/Capital Improvement Plan

If necessity is the mother of invention in the engineering world, is establishing a sustainable source of funding the spark of innovation for nonprofits? That seems to be the case for the Shiawassee River Water Trail Coalition (SRWTC). As they write an updated Development/Capital Improvement Plan for the Shiawassee River Water Trail (SRWT), the Coalition is also investigating a novel funding source. They're talking TIF.

"We're working on updating the development plan that we submitted to the U.S. National Park Service five years ago so that it continues to reflect our vision for a thriving water trail," says David Lossing, chair of the SRWTC. "We also need an updated plan as we explore the

possibility of using tax increment funding, or TIF, for the future, which has never been done for a river trail before."

Creating a TIFA (tax increment financing authority) for the SRWT is not only a novel funding method, it also helps strengthen the larger view of the water trail as a river community that connects the interests and needs of the many municipalities, businesses, and landowners along the waterway.

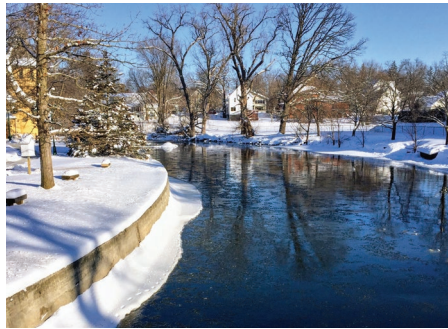
"Stronger ideas, solutions, and actions come when we view ourselves as one river trail community that connects our unique towns," says Lossing. "This helps all our towns realize the environmental, economic, and social benefits from a shared sense of place and responsibility."

### Plan to Succeed

SRWTC has a history of success when it comes to writing development plans. Thanks to a WIN-supported plan sent to the U.S. National Park Service, the SRWT received designation as a National Water Trail in 2020, one of only 35 in the U.S. and four in Michigan.

Now the Coalition is looking forward to focus on future community and environmental needs. With 24 launch sites along the length of the river, Coalition members see the benefit of defining a consistent approach and uniform suite of amenities at current launch sites, as well as establishing the flexibility to create new launch sites.





Photos include people from Friends of the Shiawassee River, Keepers of the Shiawassee River, SRWTC, and U of M College of Architecture and Urban Planning.

The updated Development/Capital Improvement Plan will outline those common amenities, including restroom facilities, kayak lockers, paved parking lots, interpretative and wayfinding signage, drinking water stations, and accessible launch facilities where appropriate.

## A TIF Act to Follow

Even with organizations like Saginaw Bay WIN that offer grants, sources for financial support in the region are limited. In some cases, the demand for reliable funding can result in competition between river trail communities rather than

“WIN is a great advocate for conservation in the Saginaw Bay Watershed. They’ve been proactive in supporting a variety of improvement projects along the Shiawassee River. We are happy to have them support our efforts to plan for sustainability and excellence along the Shiawassee River Water Trail.”

— David Lossing,  
Shiawassee River Water Trail  
Coalition

collaboration. SRWTC’s goal in considering TIF is to create one sustainable funding source for the interconnected SRWT community.

TIF is a state-authorized funding tool most often used by DDAs (downtown development authorities). Instead of a downtown, SRWTC’s proposed TIF district is an 88-mile-long integrated river community that begins in Holly and continues to Chesaning.

The WIN grant is helping the Coalition investigate the feasibility of using TIF in this completely new way. By supporting the development of a capital improvements plan that will become part of the TIF effort, WIN is helping further the first use of the TIF statute in Michigan to protect and enhance a recreational environment connecting 23 communities along a river trail.

## TIF Research

Being the first to consider a river trail TIF isn’t a simple task. So the SRWTC engaged urban planning graduate students at the University of Michigan’s College of Architecture and Urban Planning to help inform the process. Under the guidance of Professor Richard Norton, Ph.D., J.D., the students are researching critical aspects for TIF usage as their capstone project:

**Analyze** land parcels using GIS (geographic information system) to create a map that overlays SRWTC’s proposed TIF district with any that already exist along the water trail

**Explore** the possibility of changing the statute’s language to expand TIF usage to water trail communities

**Investigate** how other water trails around the country are funded

**Outline** the pros and cons of pursuing and using TIF for the SRWT

“This is an innovative use of a TIF district, which makes it a very attractive capstone project for our urban planning graduate students. They have an opportunity to contribute at the front end of a paradigm shift,” says Norton, professor of the Urban and Regional Planning Program, University of Michigan. “The students’ research will give the Coalition a better sense of whether it makes sense to pursue TIF as a funding source.”

## 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.





# Countdown to Launch

Finn Road Park and Lake Access Improvement Project



“Hidden gems” are those place-specific community marvels that create a special sense of pride for residents and discovery for visitors. In the Saginaw Bay Watershed, Hampton Charter Township’s Finn Road Park is ready to shine. The WIN-funded Finn Road Park and Lake Access Improvement Project is designed to enhance and expand the park’s unique recreational opportunities while focusing on accessibility and sustainability. When the project is complete, Finn Road Park and Campground will be a community gem that invites people of all abilities to enjoy the natural beauty of the area and Saginaw Bay.

The nine miles of Saginaw Bay shoreline in Hampton Charter Township is a natural advantage for the area. However, Finn Road

Park is the only spot where the public can easily access the bay, making it *the* place to launch a variety of outdoor explorations.

Finn Road Park is perfectly situated to be the starting point for land and water adventures. It hugs the Saginaw Bay shoreline along the renowned Saginaw Bay Blueways Water Trail and is just steps away from Hampton Township Nature Trail and Quanicassee State Wildlife Area. The park and campground are ready for improvements outlined in the plan to become universally welcoming.

“I am excited about improving accessibility at the park because that will make it possible for everyone to enjoy nature there,” says Terri Close, Hampton Charter Township supervisor. “Situated in

a freshwater coastal habitat on Saginaw Bay, Finn Road Park will be a great place for people of all abilities to canoe or kayak, fish, birdwatch, play, and just relax.”

## Universally Open for Fun

Hampton Charter Township’s planned improvements to Finn Road Park and Campground are inspired by a questionnaire sent out to its residents. Their responses spotlighted the need for improvements to local parks along the water. The township is answering that need with ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant updates that will open this local gem to more people, emphasize sustainability, and positively influence the community’s identity.





Working with Spicer Group, a professional engineering company, Hampton Charter Township developed the Finn Road Park and Lake Access Improvement Project that includes:

**Kayak and Canoe Launch** that is universally accessible with paved handicap-accessible parking

**Playground** with new equipment, trash receptacles, and benches

**Rain Garden** featuring native plantings that help slow water infiltration and filter pollutants, along with interpretative signage to explain the importance of the plants and habitat

**Paved Accessible Walkway** from parking lot and around the playground

“The improvements will make it possible for anyone and everyone who visits Finn Road Park to use the new kayak and canoe launch, boat launch, trails, and park,” says Close. “Providing accessible non-motorized boat access to the bay opens opportunities to experience this freshwater habitat while preserving its natural features.”



## Welcome to the Water

The area’s unique freshwater coastal habitat features 200 species of birds and hundreds of species of Michigan wildlife, including a variety of fish like walleye, bass, and perch. The abundance of wildlife is a major reason why Finn Road Park is popular, especially to fishers and boaters.

Currently, visitors with disabilities have a difficult time getting into their kayaks and canoes without assistance. To offer a safe and easy way for boaters of all abilities to launch their boats, Hampton Charter Township is planning to purchase and install an EZ Launch® with the help of WIN funding.

“I look forward to more people discovering and feeling welcome at Finn Road Park and Campground. We want everyone to be able to make their own adventures on Saginaw Bay and along the nature trails nearby.” says Close. “The success of our improvement plan will be measured by the fun, recreation, relaxation, and improved health gained when people spend time at the park.”

“Applying for a Saginaw Bay WIN grant is a great experience. They gave us a lot of input and support throughout the process. I encourage other municipalities and organizations whose projects fit WIN’s goals to apply for a grant, because your project will benefit in so many ways.”

— Terri Close,  
Hampton Charter Township

## 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 a shared vision and goals





# Space to Learn

## Schoolyard Habitat Grants



“Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand.” More than 2,000 years ago, Confucius gave a great description of the power of experiential learning. Today, students are getting personally involved in learning about the environment and environmental stewardship by stepping out of their school buildings. A growing number of schools in the Saginaw Bay Watershed are creating outdoor classrooms that engage students and strengthen their understanding about nature.

Schoolyard Habitat Grants offered by the Chippewa Nature Center (CNC) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are helping area elementary, middle, and high schools create outdoor classrooms that foster student curiosity and learning, empower teachers, and strengthen environmental stewardship

throughout our watershed communities.

Together, the USFWS’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the CNC provide habitat restoration services combined with tailored curriculum, support materials, and teacher training to create outdoor education areas on school grounds. The outdoor classrooms contain native wetland and grassland habitats that soon teem with birds, bees, insects, wildflowers, and more for students to discover and study.

“The wonderful thing about outdoor classrooms is the way students easily connect a familiar place with important environmental concepts using hands-on lessons,” says Jenn Kirts, CNC director of programs. “In similar projects funded by Saginaw Bay WIN in 2004 and 2019, we clearly saw students who struggle in the classroom

begin to thrive when they learn in an outdoor classroom.”

### The Nature of Learning

For decades, CNC’s naturalists have introduced young people to the wonders of nature at their location in Midland. Now, with the help of WIN funding for the Schoolyard Habitat Grants, the CNC is empowering teachers through training and curriculum development to do the same at their own schools.

Lessons aligned with Michigan Department of Education standards and tailored to each schoolyard environment offer experiences that engage students’ intellect *and* their five senses. Being in an outside classroom nurtures learning in a profoundly personal way. In addition, teachers and students no longer must travel – saving



“WIN’s support means absolutely everything. We couldn’t do this without their funding that allows us to dedicate our staff to creating the educational component for the Schoolyard Habitat Grants. We can reach more schools and students throughout the Saginaw Bay Watershed to help strengthen their commitment to environmental stewardship.”

— Jenn Kirts,  
Chippewa Nature Center

time and expense - to observe and learn from nature and the way it changes throughout the year.

CNC also supports teachers by offering training and CNC staff-facilitated programs that ensure they have the resources needed to effectively educate students and bring out the environmental stewards in each of them.

St. Lorenz Lutheran School in Frankenmuth received a Schoolyard Habitat Grant in 2020 to create a pollinator wildflower garden at the school. After two years of restoration and planting, the garden is now open for a variety of environmental science lessons.



“Our pollinator garden is fulfilling all the objectives I hoped for,” says Mandy Liddle, environmental education director at St. Lorenz Lutheran School. “It encourages our classes to get outside to witness plant and insect life cycles, teaches the importance of planting native wildflowers for pollinators, provides habitat for local wildlife, and creates enthusiasm for environmental stewardship among students and families.”

For the current phase of the Schoolyard Habitat Grants, WIN funding will cover expenses related to curriculum development, teacher training, and grant administration tasks by CNC staff. It will also help CNC provide study guides and educational supplies to participating schools. A part of the grant will make a difference on school grounds, as it helps support habitat restoration.

## Restoring Native Habitat



Creating an effective learning environment also requires expert guidance for habitat restoration, a vital component of the Schoolyard Habitat Grants. The USFWS works cooperatively with the CNC and grantees to restore the wetland, grassland, and pollinator habitats on school grounds.

“I love the transformation that takes place when an outdoor classroom is created. As the school administration, faculty, and students and their families



Schools in the Saginaw Bay Watershed that have embarked on Schoolyard Habitat Grants are:

- Bullock Creek Elementary School – *Bullock Creek School District*
- Bullock Creek Middle School – *Bullock Creek School District*
- Center for Excellence in STEM Education and the Child Development and Learning Lab – *Central Michigan University*
- Central Elementary – *Linden Community Schools*
- Heritage High School and White Pine Middle School – *Saginaw Township Community Schools*
- Meridian Elementary School – *Meridian Public Schools*
- North Elementary – *Birch Run Area Schools*
- R.B. Havens Elementary – *Swan Valley School District*
- Rolland-Warner Middle School – *Lapeer Community Schools*
- St. Lorenz Lutheran School – *Frankenmuth*
- Weiss Elementary – *Saginaw Township Community Schools*
- Zilwaukee School – *Saginaw Public Schools*

volunteer to help USFWS and CNC with the habitat restoration, they gain a sense of ownership and pride in the learning space,” says Kirts. “Environmental stewardship starts at the school with kids discovering their love of nature in outdoor classrooms and then has an amazing ripple effect to the larger community.”

“The Schoolyard Habitat Grants offer numerous benefits for the teachers and schools that receive grants, including expert guidance, curriculum development, habitat restoration, and a supply of native plants,” says Liddle. “All of that helps nurture a healthy environment for students and native wildlife. The excitement and curiosity on students’ faces as they learn in our outdoor space speaks volumes.”







# Mission: Inclusion

## Nelson Woods Acquisition and Improvement Project



The mission – and Little Forks Conservancy chose to accept it – is to permanently protect and improve Nelson Woods, a large parcel of land on the Tittabawassee River. Building a healthy native habitat there doesn't require impossible turbo-fueled action and improbable disguises. To successfully create a new, accessible, and thriving nature preserve requires something more powerful: a collaborative effort. With funding from WIN, Little Forks Conservancy is working with other organizations to add Nelson Woods to a network of nature areas that conserves vital watershed habitat and welcomes the public to experience it firsthand.

“Acquiring the Nelson Woods property is a no-brainer. Along with its beautiful riverside location and native habitat, the property is easy for the public to visit. It's just a few minutes'

drive from Downtown Midland, close to Windover High School, and a little over two miles from the Pere Marquette Rail Trail,” says Elan Lipschitz, Little Forks Conservancy executive director. “This is really nature in our backyard that offers new opportunities for people to explore and learn.”

Connecting the community to nature is fundamental to the Nelson Woods Acquisition and Improvement Project. To achieve that goal, planned site improvements include universal design standards that will open the property to visitors of all abilities so they can experience a healthy native habitat along the Tittabawassee River.

### Inclusive Nature

Featuring 1,900 feet along the Tittabawassee River and acres of hardwood forest and floodplain, Nelson Woods will provide

needed habitat for a diversity of plants and animals, as well as opportunities for people to learn about and enjoy nature. Little Forks Conservancy plans to acquire and begin restoring the 106-acre Nelson Woods property in 2023 with support from WIN and other organizations.

“Key to the project's success is creating a preserve that is not only representative of a healthy natural habitat but also meets standards for public accessibility,” says Lipschitz. “PM Blough, Inc., a landscape architectural firm, provided recommendations for the infrastructure needed to ensure people with limited mobility can enjoy the preserve.”

Planned improvements to the property include creating a trailhead and universally accessible trail to the river, building a river overlook, and adding other amenities.



WIN funding will help Little Forks Conservancy acquire interpretative and wayfinding signage and support critical invasive species removal for habitat restoration.

## Collaboration for Restoration

Grants from WIN and other funders make it possible for Little Forks Conservancy to collaborate with area conservation organizations to complete the Nelson Woods Project. For the habitat improvement component of the project, experts from Chippewa Nature Center (CNC) are mission-critical to invasive species removal on the property.

“Collaboration with specialists from other organizations is fundamental to our success, helping us complete the project efficiently and effectively,” says Lipschitz. “To be good stewards of the property, it’s important that we plan for long-term maintenance. Partnering with CNC adds their expertise to a sustainable land management plan.”

Habitat rehabilitation efforts to remove invasive species at Nelson Woods will also help restore the floodplain on the property, an

“Saginaw Bay WIN is a great organization to work with. They help grantees look at all aspects of a project to make it both successful and sustainable. WIN’s support is instrumental to our success on this project and others they’ve supported.”

— Elan Lipschitz,  
Little Forks Conservancy

important environmental and community benefit. With 50 acres of land in the Tittabawassee River floodplain, a new Nelson Woods preserve full of native plants will contribute to the City of Midland’s resiliency plans to minimize damage in future flooding events.

“We anticipate that Nelson Woods will get a lot of use by Midland residents, people using the Pere Marquette Rail Trail, and visitors to the area. I’m excited that this important land conservation project will give more people a chance to experience the incredible nature

## Little Forks Conservancy Nature Preserves

The Nelson Woods property will become part of vital green infrastructure made up of nature preserves and natural areas created by Little Forks Conservancy:

### MIDLAND COUNTY

- Averill Preserve
- Forestview Natural Area
- Riverview Natural Area
- Steiner Preserve
- Szok Preserve

### GLADWIN COUNTY

- Lane Preserve

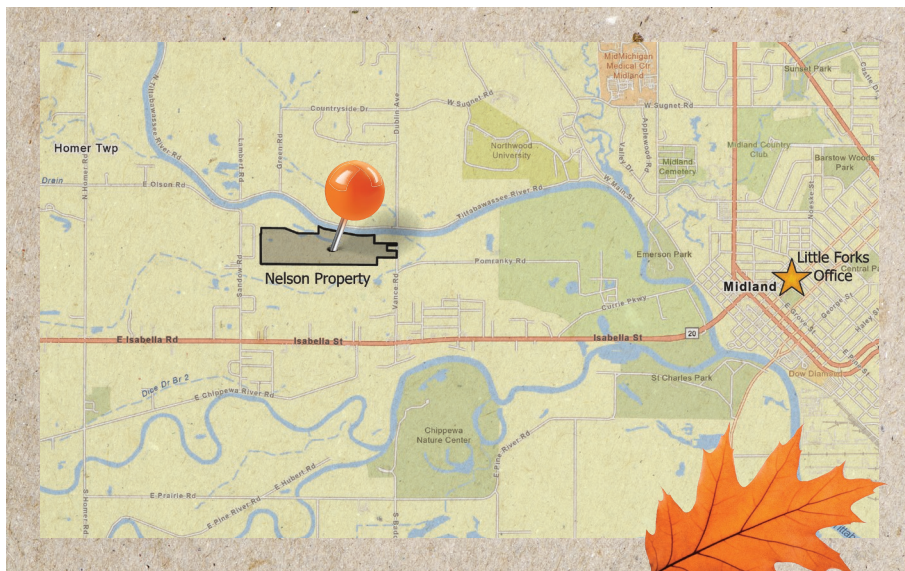
living along the river right here in our neighborhood,” says Lipschitz.

As a thriving nature preserve, Nelson Woods will conserve the land, strengthen the native habitat, mitigate damage from future flooding, provide recreational and educational opportunities, and open this vital Saginaw Bay Watershed environment to people of all abilities.

## 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.







## Contact Us

For more information about WIN, visit [www.saginawbaywin.org](http://www.saginawbaywin.org) or contact:

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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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CONSERVATION FUND