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SAGINAW BAY  
WATERSHED  
INITIATIVE  
NETWORK

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 2023 Annual Report with you.


For more than two decades, WIN has advocated for sustainability in our region, fostering relationships between our communities, regional economy, and the environment. We strive to support projects that provide balance and help groups think about new projects in new ways.

Key to our work is a sense that nature, and everything that it encompasses, is fundamental to our wellbeing. In 2023, we focused heavily on the relationship between people and the earth, supporting projects that took care of and provided exposure to the natural world. In this report, you'll read about efforts to open and conserve habitats for animals that were constrained, restore landscapes back to natural settings, and educate young people through interactive and interpretive projects about the importance of nature in our everyday lives. These focus areas are a critical part of every WIN investment – something that you could say is second nature to us.

WIN works because of fruitful partnerships with local governments, creative agencies, passionate individuals, and generous businesses and foundations. These partners provide the technical support, funding, and encouragement to turn terrific ideas into impactful solutions. We're already hard at work on 2024 projects, with our past efforts setting the stage for new initiatives that will benefit the Saginaw Bay Watershed.



Michael Kelly  
The Conservation Fund



ON THE COVER: The landscaping at the Chippewa Nature Center's new Nature Education Center will feature native plants that help protect wildlife and water quality in the Saginaw Bay Watershed.

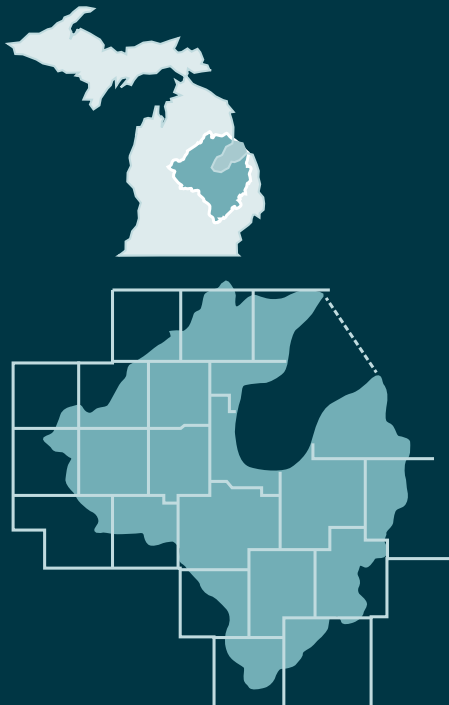
## WIN Partners

A committed group of 12 foundations supports 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.



# Natural Solutions

Saginaw Bay WIN proudly supports projects that are natural solutions. “Natural” in the way they incorporate environmental, social, and economic factors into transformational solutions to answer challenges in the Saginaw Bay Watershed. And “natural” in the way they respect and value the crucial connection between people and the environment.

The projects WIN backs are markedly diverse, yet they all create a passionate community of dedicated individuals, experts, and private and governmental organizations. Project excellence is a given when a community of leaders is fearless, enthusiastic, and working toward a shared vision.

By offering early support and guidance, WIN injects a burst of confidence into a project through our funding. Larger sources of funding often look for that first “badge of belief” as an indication of project viability when they make financial decisions. WIN is honored to provide our first-in support to a variety of natural solutions throughout the Saginaw Bay Watershed.

The innovation and commitment that our partners bring to their projects is inspiring. Together with WIN, these project champions ensure that projects designed to help protect the Watershed are natural successes.

## The 2023 Saginaw Bay WIN grants were awarded to the following projects:

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Camp Shiawassee Canoe/Kayak Launch - *Shiawassee Family YMCA*

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Fort Road Trail Loop - Cass River Greenways - *Bridgeport Township*

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Gladwin City Park FAA Site Invasive Species Eradication and Habitat Restoration - *Gladwin Conservation District*

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Integrating Native Plants, Wildlife, and Water Quality Practices into the Nature Education Center - *Chippewa Nature Center*

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Sanback Dam Removal and Stream Restoration - *Huron Pines*

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Shiatown Park Improvement Readiness - *Shiawassee County*

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Shiawassee Access and Riverfront Development - *Village of Byron*

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South Branch Flint River Land Conservation - *Six Rivers Land Conservancy*

## 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



# Launch-a-Canoe and Camp Songs, too

## Camp Shiawassee Canoe/Kayak Launch

For lots of people, memories of going to summer day camp as kids are among their most cherished. The standout memories are not of the mosquito bites and poison ivy, but of new friends, archery, swimming, hiking, and camp songs. And canoeing! Young campers today continue to make memories every summer at Camp Shiawassee. Now, through the WIN-supported Camp Shiawassee Canoe/Kayak Launch project, those treasured times spent canoeing and kayaking will be even easier to enjoy.

Camp Shiawassee, which is owned and operated by the Shiawassee Family YMCA, welcomes 500 area young people every summer to a traditional day camp experience that also weaves academic enrichment opportunities into the daily activities. The camp focuses

on fun, active, healthy living while helping campers develop social-emotional skills.

“Camp Shiawassee is a unique opportunity in our community, giving kids outdoor experiences that are engaging and enriching,” says Laura Archer, Shiawassee Family YMCA chief executive officer. “During our summer sessions, 5- to 12-year-olds get a chance to do things they might not have access to otherwise, like practicing archery, going hiking on nature trails, and learning how to canoe and kayak. Mostly, Camp Shiawassee is a safe place for kids to have fun being kids.”

The 180-acre camp property includes 140 acres that are permanently protected through a land conservation easement. This property embraces 13,500 feet of undisturbed natural frontage on the Shiawassee River that

is arguably the most pristine navigable stretch of the river. If there’s an ideal setting for activities that encourage young people to be active and gain an appreciation for the natural world, this is the spot.

## H2-Whoa!

Borrowing one of the weekly themes from Camp Shiawassee, H2-Whoa! is a perfect summary of the Camp Shiawassee Canoe/Kayak Launch project. A grant from WIN is helping the camp establish two canoe/kayak launches on the Shiawassee River. With WIN’s support, the project has moved from the camp’s wish list to implementation.

Simple in design and extremely cost-effective, the launches will be a huge improvement for campers and staff while having minimal impact on the integrity



of the riverbank.

The new canoe/kayak launches will allow campers and staff to safely put in and take out, making canoeing and kayaking lessons and excursions more manageable. No more scrambling from the riverbank into the river to climb aboard a canoe or kayak (unless a camper's real goal is to get wet!).

The WIN grant is helping cover the costs for concrete for the ramp, gravel for the ramp's sub-

“Applying for a WIN grant was an easy decision because our project has a natural connection to WIN’s mission. It would’ve taken us years to raise money for the new launches if we hadn’t received the WIN grant. WIN provides clear, helpful communication and the people have a passion for the Shiawassee River that closely aligns with our own. We are thankful we connected with WIN.”

—Laura Archer  
Shiawassee Family YMCA

base and a walking path, and riprap for riverbank stabilization. This spring, volunteers from the YMCA and Friends of the Shiawassee River (FOSR) will do the hard work of installing the launches.

“With the WIN grant and lots of volunteer labor from people who love the camp and river, we will have the launches ready for campers this year,” says Archer. “It’s amazing how many people in the area don’t know that Camp Shiawassee exists. The new launches will help us communicate to our members and the community all we have to offer right in their backyard.”

## Off Camp Time

Beyond Camp Shiawassee’s needs, the new launches will connect the property to another regional gem: the Shiawassee River National Water Trail (SRNWT). Designated as a national water trail in 2020, the SRNWT comprises 88 miles of the Shiawassee River from Holly to Chesaning. Now, Camp Shiawassee will add two easy-to-use access points on

this nationally recognized and beautiful water trail.

In coordination with the YMCA, the new launches are ideal for non-camp activities, including:

- paddle skill courses for people of all ages
- guided paddling experiences
- team building and corporate retreats
- sampling sites for FOSR to survey macroinvertebrates
- opportunities to monitor and protect river health

**“I’m looking forward to the many ways that the launches will contribute to the growth of our summer camp programs, canoe and kayak activities, and team building opportunities. These new offerings will help boost the financial position of the YMCA, which in turn allows us to provide more outdoor experiences,” says Archer. “Along the way, our campers, YMCA members, and the community will be able to spend more time in the natural beauty of the Shiawassee River, having fun and creating memories that last a lifetime.”**

## 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.



# Showcasing the Power of Nature

Integrating Native Plants, Wildlife, and Water Quality Practices into the Nature Education Center

The adage says, “less is more.” But what about adding on to a wonderful community resource? Sometimes “more” is powerful. The Chippewa Nature Center’s (CNC) new Nature Education Center will add to the bounty of educational opportunities available to young people. With 10,000 square feet dedicated to education, the new facility will offer more indoor space and, just as importantly, more outdoor space to teach about and showcase the native ecosystem that envelops CNC and nearby communities.

As students start their environmental stewardship journey in brand-new classrooms, they may be surprised to discover that lessons begin outside as they walk through purposeful landscaping that is rich with native plants and wildlife. Funding from WIN is helping plant – literally and figuratively – those first in-person introductions to the native ecosystem.

“At CNC we often say: ‘we’re at our best when we’re outdoors.’ And that’s even more true when we’re working with students.

The way they respond to being in nature is remarkable, which makes learning more engaging for them,” says Dennis Pilaske, CNC executive director. “As we answer our ever-growing need for more educational space, we strive to design so that both the indoor and outdoor spaces support active learning.”

When completed in early 2025, the Nature Education Center will support and expand CNC’s extremely popular youth-focused education programs, including Nature Preschool, Nature Day Camp, and school field trips.

“The grant we received from WIN is such an important piece in designing and building the new Nature Education Center. WIN funding is helping us ensure the layout of native plants around the building truly fits the environment and that we are integrating it in beneficial ways. Saginaw Bay WIN is a visionary group that invests in a variety of great projects within the Watershed that have vital environmental, economic, and community impact.”



—Dennis Pilaske  
Chippewa Nature Center

## Making Nature a Natural Choice

An important goal in building the Nature Education Center is to design and place the new building in a way that minimizes its impact on the environment while maximizing educational opportunities. Once it opens for learning, students and visitors will experience the outdoor space with all their senses while they learn about the many ways sustainable landscaping can be used, even in their own yards and neighborhoods.

A portfolio of programs tailored for schools, the public, and CNC’s camp and preschool will be held in the Nature Education Center’s outdoor space, highlighting the native plants growing there and the vital role they play in the local ecosystem, especially in protecting water quality.



Nature Education Center Main Entrance Architectural Rendering

To help showcase the power of using nature in sustainable site design and landscaping, WIN’s grant will support:

- building a bioswale
- creating filter strips alongside the parking lot
- integrating native plants in the bioswale and filter strips
- landscaping using native wildflowers, grasses, shrubs, and trees
- assembling and placing nest boxes
- constructing interpretive signage explaining these features

“As we teach visitors about the bioswales, filter strips, pollinator gardens, and native plants used at the new facility and they see them in action, we hope they will be inspired to employ these natural choices in their own built environments,” says Pilaske.



Nature Education Center Covered Courtyard Architectural Rendering

## For the Community

As an essential asset in the community for 60 years, the CNC inspires the Saginaw Bay Watershed community to be stewards of the natural world – their world. The new Nature Education Center will strengthen CNC’s efforts to help people understand and value their connection to nature.

**“We’ve had an incredible outpouring of support for the Nature Education Center from the community, which is exciting” says Pilaske. “We strive to meet the community’s need for nature education that focuses on the importance of developing and sustaining a healthy ecosystem.”**

## 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



# A Clear Answer

## Sanback Dam Removal and Stream Restoration

If life was like the game show Jeopardy, the \$400 answer might be ...

It's old, dangerous, non-functioning, decaying, and an eyesore in the City of Rose City.

And the question would be...

*What is Sanback Dam?*

Even though it's not a game show, the Saginaw Bay Watershed has a champion in Huron Pines. The conservation organization is leading the effort to remove the Sanback Dam in Ogemaw County and restore Beechwood Creek, a tributary of Houghton Creek and the Rifle River, to its natural course and flow.

Like many dams built in Michigan in the 19th century, the Sanback Dam began its life with a purpose. Nowadays, it no longer provides hydropower - or any

useful commodity - and has lost its structural integrity. In fact, the last inspection by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) classified the dam as a significant hazard in unsatisfactory condition.

"Sanback Dam no longer provides Rose City and its residents with any economic or community benefits. But what's worse, the severely damaged dam poses a real safety risk. Someone walking around the dam could get hurt or drown, which no one wants. And if the dam fails, it could endanger people, property, and infrastructure downstream," says Josh Leisen, Huron Pines senior project manager.

In addition to being a safety threat, failure of the Sanback Dam would have a huge negative impact on the environment by

degrading water quality, channel stability, and fish and wildlife habitat.

EGLE's call for immediate action to address the dam's structural and safety issues has a clear solution: remove the dam and restore Beechwood Creek to its original course. So, to do that, Rose City turned to the conservation experts at Huron Pines for guidance and assistance.

## A Lot of R and R

While the ultimate answer is R and R (i.e., remove the dam and restore the stream's natural channel) to negate safety and environmental concerns, completing this project effectively is a highly specialized process that takes expertise, time, planning, and money.

In 2023, Huron Pines secured





\$300,000 through EGLE’s Dam Risk Reduction grant program, as well as a WIN grant that meets the 10-percent match required by the program. WIN’s funding is paying for design development and the permitting needed before actual demolition and restoration can begin.

GEI Consultants, an engineering firm with dam removal experience, is working with Huron Pines and Rose City to provide oversight and help define project requirements, including overall design featuring Natural Channel Design principles, stream restoration methods, sediment management, permit securement, and cost estimates.

“Once the design and permitting phase is completed, we can begin the complicated job of removing the dam and restoring Beechwood and Houghton creeks,” says Leisen. “We are dedicated to developing a design that will greatly improve the aesthetics and function of the dam site and its former six-acre impoundment. The final restoration will protect the cold-water fisheries and aquatic habitat, remove an eyesore, and create a safe, welcoming, and livelier green space along the creek.”

## Designed for the Community and Wildlife

WIN’s support is also helping Huron Pines connect with the residents of Rose City to ensure the project is meaningful and valuable to the community. Along with educating interested residents about dam removal and stream restoration, Huron Pines is seeking their input to shape the vision of the restored site.

Near the dam site, in the heart of Rose City, is an underused park. This area offers exciting potential for a new community gem. By incorporating the community’s vision for the space, Huron Pines and GEI Consultants can develop a design that promotes stream and wetlands health, is technically feasible, and welcomes people to enjoy the natural beauty in the midst of their town.

**“We are encouraged by the fact that the community largely supports the project. Residents welcome the removal of the dam and the creation of a space where they can enjoy being outside in nature,” says Leisen. “I think a lot of people, including all of us at Huron Pines, are excited by the possibilities of what the finished restoration could look like, including incorporating ideas such as community gardens, walking trails, bridge, and/or picnic shelter.”**

The Sanback Dam Removal and Stream Restoration Project is a sustainable solution to the current environmental and community challenges Rose City is facing and will protect and restore this high-quality, cold-water resource to a natural stream channel and enjoyable park site.

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**“** *Huron Pines’ successful projects are built on partners, stakeholders, and funding. We are thankful that WIN’s support has a major impact on our success. Beyond specific projects and grants, WIN hosts the State of the Bay Conference that offers valuable information and networking opportunities.* **”**

—Josh Leisen,  
Huron Pines



# Surf and Turf Preservation

## South Branch Flint River Land Conservation

Surf and turf may be a good dinner choice in a restaurant, and an *excellent* choice for helping protect the Saginaw Bay Watershed. Well, not actually “surf and turf” in the menu sense. Rather, the winning efforts to advance the vibrant, essential, and indisputable connection between land use and water quality. Six Rivers Land Conservancy (SRLC) is pursuing a land conservancy project on the South Branch Flint River that will have a significant impact on both the “surf and turf” of the Saginaw Bay Watershed from Hunters Creek all the way to the Bay.

For the South Branch Flint River Land Conservation project, SRLC is conducting field evaluations on 1,200 acres of land that encompasses more than a mile of river frontage. This crucial preliminary work, funded by a WIN grant, involves the time and expertise of SRLC staff to assess the land, conduct due diligence, and develop a strategy needed to protect these significant wetland areas and critical headwaters.

“WIN’s support is crucial to furthering this time-dependent opportunity for the permanent conservation of this important property. Conserving this large

section of land will help preserve the unique character and culture of the area and community,” says Chris Bunch, SRLC executive director. “And by preventing future land division, conversion, and development of this property, we also help safeguard the water quality of the South Branch Flint River and Hunters Creek watersheds.”

### Landing Success

Land conservation projects like this are complex and sophisticated efforts that involve technical, monetary, and, often, emotional components.



Landowners have a lot to think about when making land conservation decisions. It doesn't happen overnight. A "fast" project can take one year to complete, most take longer, and some take decades. WIN's support is helping this project stay in the fast(er) lane.

The grant from WIN covers the costs for SRLC personnel to complete field assessments, mapping, delineation of habitat boundaries, and development of detailed land parcel information. In addition, WIN is funding the appraisal, survey, title search, and environmental assessment of the property.

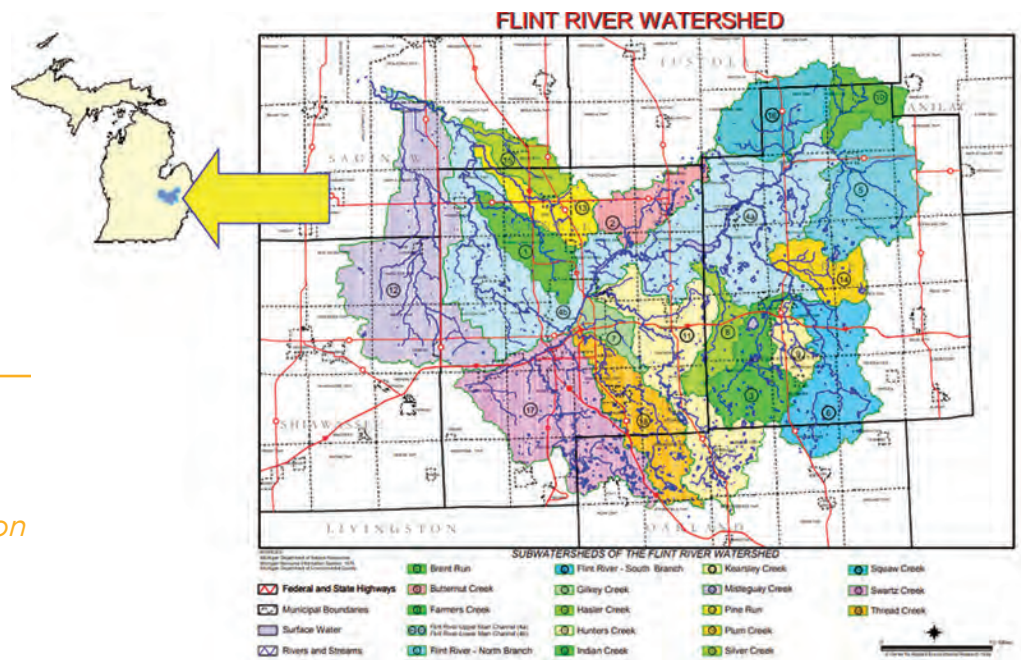
"Land conservation and the ability to prioritize the best areas for preservation can be an involved task. With this investment, we are helping SRLC take a forward-looking approach," says Michael Kelly, Saginaw Bay WIN director. "Knowing that the South Branch Flint River contains

a critical matrix of land uses that ultimately impact areas downstream – all the way to the Saginaw Bay – made this grant decision an easy one for WIN."

## The Big Picture

The South Branch Flint River Land Conservation project is the first phase of a two-phase project. The preliminary work in this first stage will inform and become part of a sound land acquisition strategy. And ultimately, when both phases are complete, the project will strengthen a shared identity for those who live and work in the area by preserving this natural resource in perpetuity.

**"The success of this project will help communicate the value of protecting the natural resources that sustain and enhance our quality of life. I also hope our efforts invite people to learn more about the organizations that work to permanently protect significant habitats in the Saginaw Bay Watershed," says Bunch. "As the largest private land conservation transaction in the region, the project – from start to finish – is transformational for the community and the environment."**



“Thanks to WIN's support, our land conservation project is happening now and at the pace it is. We are grateful for their trust in us and our project and their belief that land conservation is an essential part of protecting the Saginaw Bay Watershed. Working with WIN is a gratifying experience.”

—Chris Bunch  
Six Rivers Land Conservancy

## 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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