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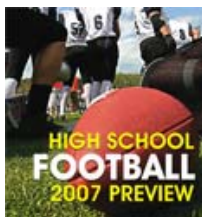
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The Ron Flannery Interview

Jacob Leonhardt

August 22, 2007 - Highland Township resident Ron Flannery, 46, was among the catalysts behind acquiring land for the new Highland Oaks county park. Flannery grew up in Detroit and went to high school in Harper Woods. He also attended Oakland University. Flannery began to work in the information technology industry in 1983. After working for a few different companies, he began his own, called One Point Solutions, 10 years ago. His company focuses on IBM software and business reporting solutions. Flannery said that entrepreneurial flare helped him come up with the idea for Highland Oaks.



SCN: We understand you were instrumental in getting the ball rolling for land acquisition to create the Highland Oaks county park. When and how did you get involved in the process of creating the county's 13th park facility? Why did you feel it was important to create the park?

Flannery: I live really close to park, like a half-mile away. I ride my bicycle down there frequently. There was a for sale sign on the property for the longest time. There was 245 acres for sale. I would always thought that it was a beautiful piece of property, and it would be a shame if it got developed. One day when I was riding by I thought it would be really make a great park. I wondered if anyone had thought of that. I'm a founding member of the Highland Conservancy. We enforce the message of stewardship of properties and connected green space. So I asked the group if they knew someone at Oakland County that I might talk to.

SCN: Sharon Greene of the Highland Equestrian Conservancy has also been credited with helping to get the park established. How did you work with her to achieve this goal? What other citizens were part of the drive, and what were their contributions?

ron flannery interview

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Flannery: She was very active. She was in our (Highland Conservancy) group at that time (2004). She knew people in the park system. She said they had been talking to some developers about an equestrian-friendly community there. So they would have larger plots but not overly populated and overly dense. The property has something like 40 percent wetlands, so apparently they thought the return on the investment wouldn't be high enough. Sharon hooked me up with someone in the parks systems. I did an initial presentation in November 2004. They said it sounded interesting but they needed to know if the township would be supportive of it. A couple of weeks later I met Highland Township Supervisor Trisha Pilchowksi. She was really supportive. She said, "Well, there's no way the township can (buy the land). But," she said, "we would certainly be supportive if you can get anything going." So then the next step was Sharon and I put together a presentation, then went to the Oakland County Parks Commission with 15 people in the room. During this time I did a lot of research on the property. Its listed in the Michigan Natural Features Inventory as a priority 2 as far as preserving it. I showed what the effects on the property would be if it were over developed. So that was a key part of the presentation, as well as the location, the geography and how it could be used as a central hub in a connected trail system. That was something Sharon had done a lot of work on.



SCN: You're active in a local land conservancy group. Please tell us about the conservancy, your role in the group, and its plans and goals.

Flannery: I'm in the Highland Conservancy, so I kept them abreast of (the Highland Oaks proposal); however, one of things I did with this was keep it very, very low key, kind of covert because I didn't want to let the cat out of the bag. If the wrong people or certain developers heard about it, maybe it would get developed. So I kept a very low profile, as did Sharon. As a member of the Highland Equestrian Conservancy, she made some of the citizens aware of that, as well as some of the members. We both tried to keep it very low profile. But after it became public knowledge, both of our groups and a number of citizens began writing letters of support.

As far as driving it through, I'd say Sharon and I were the two that pretty much drove it. I did the presentation. She helped me when we presented to the Board of Commissioners. She and I made a bunch of calls.

The Highland Conservancy was founded in 2004. Its goals are similar to the Oakland Land Conservancy's — to encourage people to donate land. They can use (donations of land) as a tax write-off and to encourage green space, not to discourage development. The official mission statement is to facilitate the conservation of land and natural resources to preserve the rural character of Highland Township. If you go to www.highlandconservancy.org, you'll see the mission statement. That's the idea, to encourage more open space and dedicating conservation easements.

SCN: Highland and other lakes area communities are situated in the projected path of urban sprawl. Development is inevitable, but can be controlled. How can communities strike a reasonable balance between development and land conservancy? How much development is too much?

Flannery: I don't know if I want to go down that path. I mean, we're talking mostly about Highland Oaks. I really like Highland in that it has a really great balance of development and access to shopping, while it still has large amounts of open space like the park. So I like the balance here and I don't discourage things getting developed. I like that Highland isn't developed a lot and we have a lot of access. So its really the perfect community so far.

SCN: How can local residents get involved in guiding the greater west Oakland area's development and preserving open, natural areas?

Flannery: Well, the Oakland Land Conservancy is a great place for that. They've been around for years. They have a number of employees. They can explain how people donate parts of their property as conservation easements and use them as tax write-offs. So, I would say to get involved with groups like that. The Highland Conservancy, the Highland Equestrian Conservancy — there's a few of those around. They can explain how the tax write-offs are done. I think people are more aware of them. We keep pretty busy.

Jacob Leonhardt is a staff writer for the Spinal Column Newsweekly



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