

# Liberty Prairie Reserve Master Plan

SUMMARY BROCHURE

June 2013

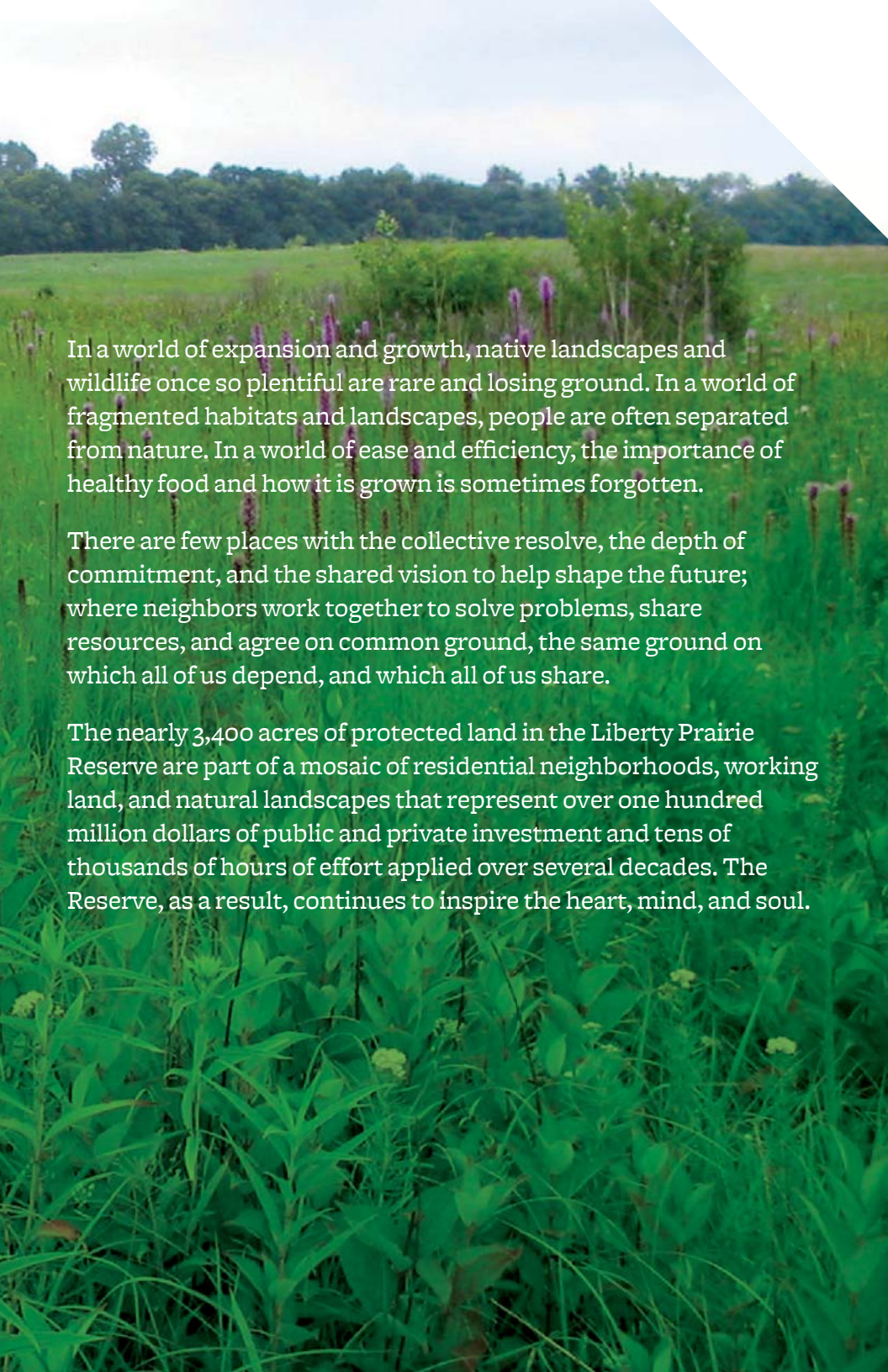
A photograph of a lush green field filled with tall plants that have long, dark purple flower spikes. The plants are in the foreground and middle ground, creating a sense of depth. In the background, there is a line of trees under a cloudy, overcast sky. The overall tone is natural and serene.

A thing is right when  
it tends to preserve  
the integrity, stability,  
and beauty of the  
biotic community.

It is wrong when it  
tends otherwise.

- *Aldo Leopold*





In a world of expansion and growth, native landscapes and wildlife once so plentiful are rare and losing ground. In a world of fragmented habitats and landscapes, people are often separated from nature. In a world of ease and efficiency, the importance of healthy food and how it is grown is sometimes forgotten.

There are few places with the collective resolve, the depth of commitment, and the shared vision to help shape the future; where neighbors work together to solve problems, share resources, and agree on common ground, the same ground on which all of us depend, and which all of us share.

The nearly 3,400 acres of protected land in the Liberty Prairie Reserve are part of a mosaic of residential neighborhoods, working land, and natural landscapes that represent over one hundred million dollars of public and private investment and tens of thousands of hours of effort applied over several decades. The Reserve, as a result, continues to inspire the heart, mind, and soul.





# The Liberty Prairie Reserve Master Plan

The Liberty Prairie Reserve consists of approximately 5,000 acres in the heart of Lake County, Illinois, between Libertyville, Grayslake, Gurnee, and Waukegan. Through cooperative efforts, nearly 3,400 acres of publicly and privately owned open land within the Reserve have been legally protected.

In 2012-13, a group of public and nongovernmental organizations gathered to document progress from the original 1991 Reserve Master Plan and make recommendations for the next 20 years. The intent of this effort is to establish a framework to fulfill the true potential and public benefit of the Reserve.

The goal of the Liberty Prairie Reserve Master Plan is to create a model Reserve of exceptional land, water, and biodiversity health where public and private landowners manage their land in ways that sustain people, plants, and wildlife. This plan envisions people restoring, enhancing, and enjoying the Reserve's rich array of natural areas. Additionally, the Reserve's agricultural values and heritage will be celebrated and continued in ways that support clean water, healthy soils, and diverse agricultural products and foods. The Master Plan includes detailed recommendations to:

- Expand core habitats.
- Support ecological management and restoration.
- Preserve more open space.
- Transition agriculture to sustainable and “biologically-based” practices.
- Improve public access and movement through and around the Reserve.
- Establish a Planning Council for Stakeholders in the Reserve

Aerial photograph showing the major landscapes of the Reserve: farmland, prairie under restoration, residences, woodlands, and wetlands (the Almond Marsh).

Image courtesy of Conserve Lake County.

# Reserve Origins and Accomplishments

Named after a rare native prairie and fen discovered in 1990, the Liberty Prairie Reserve was established in 1991 through a Master Plan adopted by the Lake County Forest Preserve District, Libertyville Township, and a group of civic-minded private landowners.

Initially called the Oak Prairie Reserve, the new township open space district acquired over 750 acres of land. Over time, more land was conserved by the Forest Preserve District and by conservation easements on private land. Prairie Crossing, the first conservation community in the region, was yet another outcome of the planning process.

Since its inception, more than \$100 million in public and private money has been invested in land acquisition, conservation easements, trails, and habitat restoration within the Reserve, and many of the original 1991 Reserve Master Plan recommendations have been accomplished:

- Over 3,400 acres of natural areas and farmland have been protected from development through more than 100 land transactions and agreements.
- Over 12 miles of new public trails wind through some of the most scenic rural landscapes in Lake County.
- Water quality has improved and hundreds of acres of natural areas are actively managed.
- Three Illinois State Nature Preserves have been established on public and private lands, demonstrating and safeguarding the unique natural heritage of the Reserve.
- Farm operations have expanded and diversified to include over 100 acres of sustainable, local organic production. Conventional grain farming has continued on nearly 700 acres.
- The Reserve was named one of four “Last Chance Landscapes in the U.S.” by Scenic America in 2000.
- In 2012, the Illinois Tollway’s IL Route 53/120 Blue Ribbon Advisory Council (BRAC) agreed to a state-of-the-art environmentally responsible parkway of no more than four lanes to replace portions of the existing IL Route 53 and 120.

Now more than ever, it is important that Lake County officials, representatives of other units of government, and private sector leaders come together to create a planning council to oversee implementation of the Reserve Master Plan.











# Master Plan Recommendations

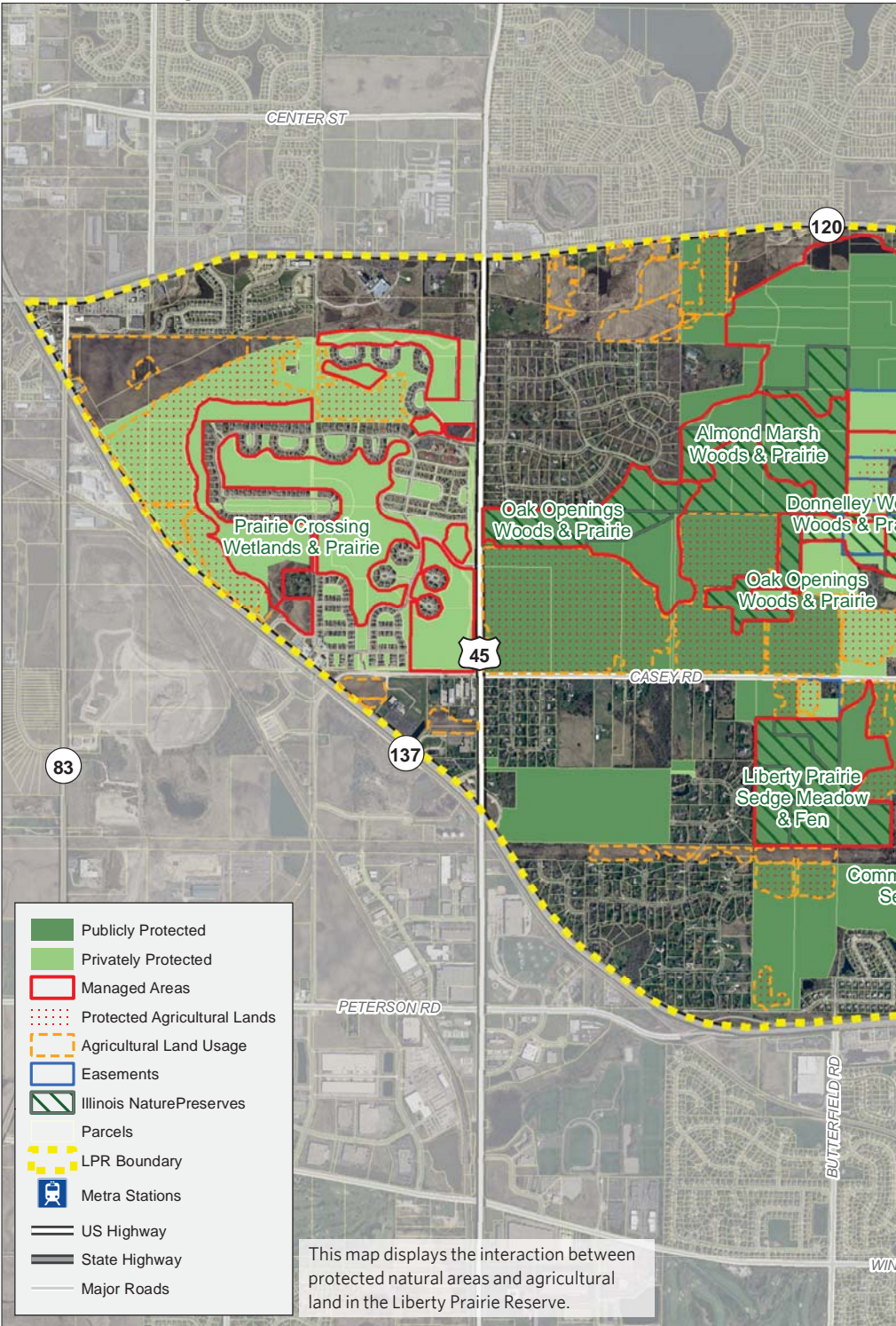
*This Executive Summary highlights most of the key conclusions and recommendations from the full Liberty Prairie Reserve Master Plan of 2013, which reflects an 18-month process by stakeholders to assess and update the Reserve's original Master Plan of 1991. All 27 conclusions and recommendations developed by the planning team can be found with background information in the complete Master Plan.*

## Expand Core Habitats

Most of the existing woodlands, prairies, and wetlands in the Reserve are fragmented and individually too small to support many of the species listed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources as threatened, endangered, or in greatest need of conservation. However, the combined scale of the Reserve's protected lands provides refuges rarely found elsewhere in the region.

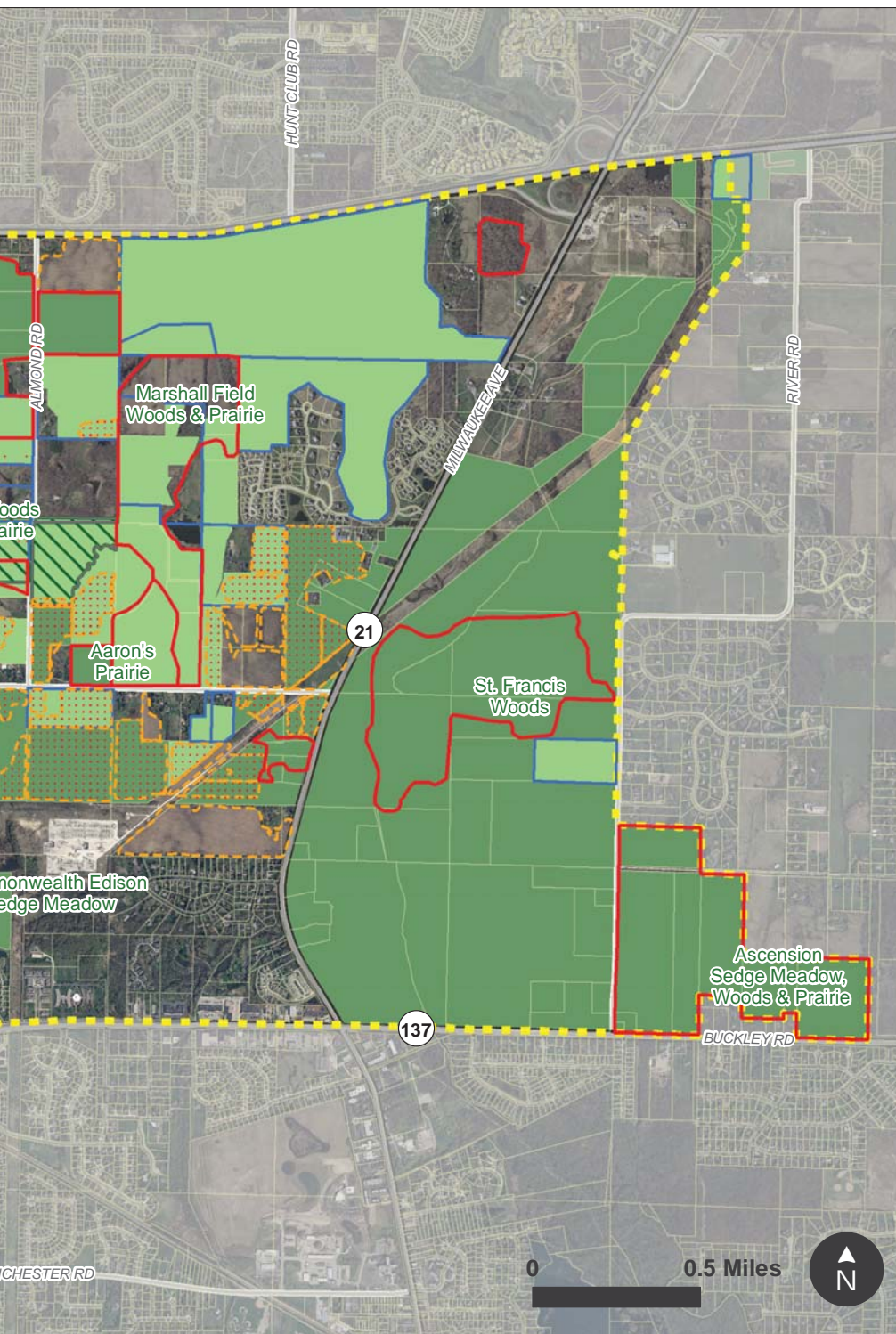
- Farmland adjacent to core habitats should be considered for restoration to native plant and animal communities, increasing the habitat value to marginalized species in our region.
- Core habitat areas of 250 acres and larger, which provide the greatest wildlife benefits, should receive priority attention for long-range planning purposes.
- Opportunities to connect privately conserved habitat areas and publicly owned natural habitat should be implemented wherever possible, depending on private landowner interest.

Protected and Managed Areas in the Reserve



Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, 2013.





## **Support Ecological Management and Restoration**

For the past 25 years, millions of dollars have been invested in the restoration of natural resources and native habitats in the Reserve, which benefits the public and our environment through cleaner water, less flooding, and healthier ecosystems. Grant dollars should continue to be sought and leveraged to help support these efforts and innovative solutions, such as the \$81 million set aside for habitat restoration in the 2012 IL Route 53/120 Blue Ribbon Advisory Council report and the recommendations of the Bull Creek - Bull's Brook Watershed Report of 2008.

- Unify efforts across the entire landscape to control invasive species and conduct prescribed burns, using cooperative interagency agreements wherever possible.
- Halt the soil erosion that continues to impair the Reserve's surface waters, drawing heavily from the Bull Creek-Bull's Brook Watershed Plan of 2008.
- Encourage participation in the Conservation@Home program for sustainable landscaping on private properties in the Reserve.









## **Preserve More Open Space**

Since the 1980s, more than 3,300 acres of land have been protected in the Reserve through acquisitions, conservation easements, and other conservation agreements. Continuing a coordinated private and public approach can help ensure future success.

- If the occasion arises to convey or transfer currently protected lands to a separate agency, the Lake County Forest Preserve District is recommended as the primary receiver of management and ownership responsibility, unless a more appropriate entity is identified.
- Key parcels of open land along Almond Road, Casey Road, and IL Route 21 should be considered high priority for protection, either through private conservation easement, public acquisition, or nature preserve dedication.
- There are opportunities to expand the Reserve boundaries, protected lands, greenways and trails east to I-94 and west to Alleghany Road. Deeper relationships with landowners should be developed to inform them of the opportunities and benefits of participating in the Reserve.





## **Transition Agriculture to Sustainable and “Biologically-Based” Practices**

Achieving land and water health goals on the 800 acres of farmland in the Reserve can be accomplished with biologically-based farming methods for all types of production. The leadership of the Prairie Crossing Organic Farm, Farm Business Development Center, and Casey Farm are some of the Chicago region’s most successful examples of sustainable farming practices.

- Biological farming practices (including organic farming) decrease harmful soil erosion, increase soil fertility, reduce negative off-farm impacts to land and water health, and reduce or eliminate the need for chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Ecologically sustainable production models including mixed vegetable production, perennial grass farming, and cover cropping should be implemented where desired by landowners.







## **Improve Public Access and Movement Through and Around the Reserve**

One of the best ways to further increase the public benefit of the Reserve is to make it more accessible to the people who live nearby. Completing improvements to the major arterials surrounding the Reserve (IL Routes 21, 45, 120, and 137) will reduce traffic in the Reserve.

- All recommendations from the June 2012 IL Route 53/120 Blue Ribbon Advisory Council report should be implemented in their entirety, particularly for an environmentally sensitive four-lane limited access parkway with a 45-mph speed limit. These recommendations should protect natural resources and enhance public access of the Reserve. Should Route 53 be built, Almond Road should be closed (except for emergency vehicles), per the Blue Ribbon Advisory Council recommendations.
- New trail connections that provide access to the Reserve and the Casey Trail should be built to connect the people who live to the north and to the south, including a bike/pedestrian underpass at IL Route 120. Almond Marsh Forest Preserve is currently isolated from other trail connections. A trail along the Almond Road corridor should be created to provide access to the Almond Marsh parking lot and the Reserve's main Casey Trail.
- The scenic views and rural character of Almond and Casey Roads should be protected. A heritage road designation, similar to that used in McHenry County, should be considered for these roads.



## **Establish a Planning Council for Stakeholders in the Reserve**

The Reserve should be managed as an integrated whole so that the activities on any particular property do not adversely affect surrounding properties. Because many landowners, both public and private, have a vested interest in caring for the natural and agricultural resources of the Reserve, bringing their representatives together regularly can ensure efficiencies and successes necessary to achieve land and water health within the entire Reserve.

- A planning council representing public officials and civic leaders should be formed and meet regularly to support integrated planning efforts and review progress toward the fulfillment of this plan.
- Coordinating these meetings with the Bull Creek - Bull's Brook Watershed coalition should be considered, given the importance of water quality and the significant overlap of stakeholders and geography.





### About the Planning Team

The planning team that helped create the Liberty Prairie Reserve Master Plan includes: Conserve Lake County; the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP); Lake County Forest Preserve District; the Lake County Departments of Planning, Transportation, and Stormwater Management; the Liberty Prairie Foundation; Libertyville Township; the Illinois Department of Natural Resources; the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission; and Openlands. Several private landowners were consulted and represented throughout this process.

### About Conserve Lake County

Conserve Lake County is a countywide conservation organization in Lake County, Illinois with a mission to preserve open land, restore natural areas, and inspire a commitment to land conservation for the benefit of people and wildlife in Lake County. Conserve Lake County (formerly the Liberty Prairie Conservancy) is committed to helping as many people as possible to be engaged in land conservation. We work with landowners who want to preserve their land, volunteers helping restore native habitat, farmers working for a vibrant local food system, activists tackling conservation issues, and homeowners searching for ways to make their land and water healthy for both people and wildlife through our Conservation@Home program.

### About CMAP

CMAP is the official regional planning organization for the northeastern Illinois counties of Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will. CMAP developed and now leads the implementation of GO TO 2040, metropolitan Chicago's first comprehensive regional plan in more than 100 years. To address anticipated population growth of more than 2 million new residents, GO TO 2040 establishes coordinated strategies that help the region's 284 communities address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment and other quality-of-life issues. See [www.cmap.illinois.gov](http://www.cmap.illinois.gov) for more information.

### Funding Acknowledgement

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Visit [www.cmap.illinois.gov/lake-county-food](http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/lake-county-food) for more information on the Liberty Prairie Reserve Master Plan.

For more information on how local governments throughout the region can support sustainable local food production, visit [www.cmap.illinois.gov/food](http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/food).





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Baxter's Grove landscape at dusk.  
Image courtesy of Conserve Lake County.

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