



PHOTO BY ANGIE LUCAS

FRUITHAVEN

It could have been a golf course. It could have been a glamorous resort with sweeping views of Lake Michigan. Instead, what was at one point the largest remaining contiguous block of farmland in Benzie County was permanently protected for farming and wildlife habitat.

Efforts to protect what is now the 176-acre Fruithaven Nature Preserve and about 360 acres of adjoining farmland began in 1999 when GTRLC worked with longtime residents Sara and Mike McKinley. The McKinleys, owners of Fruithaven Orchards, had farmed apples and other fruit on their property at the north end of Upper Herring Lake since 1955.

Developers from downstate had made a very attractive offer to buy the land for two 18-hole golf courses and a posh hotel – including a planned airstrip – but fortunately the McKinleys had a keen interest in preserving the land’s farming and natural heritage.

“They really had a strong feeling about their land and their agricultural heritage,” Chown said. “No farmer likes to see their land developed, but these farmers in particular felt even stronger than most.”

In a groundbreaking deal, GTRLC purchased the property and the Fruithaven Orchards family corporation for about \$1.4 million through a loan from what is now Fifth Third Bank. This was the kick start to a process that involved multiple private and public partners.

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After purchasing the property, GTRLC sold the property’s development rights to the state of Michigan for about \$775,000. These rights were then extinguished by the state, ensuring the land would remain undeveloped in perpetuity.

After retaining a 176-acre wooded parcel for use as a nature preserve, GTRLC then sold off the remaining 360 acres in five separate parcels to farmers who were very interested in the land’s unique growing capabilities. Because the development rights were extinguished, these parcels will forever remain working farmland, regardless of owner.

The deal was groundbreaking for GTRLC, Chown said.

“This required a higher level of sophistication than our organization had ever engaged in before that time. We had to work with multiple parties and satisfy multiple interests – the state, the sellers, the conservation buyers, the neighbors,” Chown said. “But the hallmarks of the Conservancy are that we’re creative, we solve problems and we dig in – and we really dug in on this one.”

Chown is especially grateful to the McKinleys.

“They had to take a leap of faith and give us time to do what we needed to do,” he said. “Thankfully we formed a trusting relationship and were able to complete a complex transaction.”