

## Audubon Wetlands Preserve transfer land to county district



Times-Gazette photo /Duane Martin

**Pictured at** Friday's transfer of Audubon Wetlands Preserve to the Ashland County Park District are, from left, Greater Mohican Audubon Society President Cheryl Harner, Ohio Department of Natural Resources heritage botanist Rick Gardner, GMAS members Sam Weyrick and Louise Fleming, and Mike Huber of Coldwell Banker Ward Realty.

By GINGER CHRIST  
T-G Staff Writer

The sprawl of development along U.S. 250 near interstate 71 will be broken up by a slice of nature.

Audubon Wetlands preserve – 109 acres of natural wetlands will hold a permanent place along the highway, serving as grounds for wetland education and also as a site to appreciate nature and the success of an ecosystem. The preserve marks the 10<sup>th</sup> park formed by the Ashland County Park District in its five years of existence, said Sam Weyrick, a park district commissioner.

Greater Mohican Audubon Society purchased the land for \$414, 385 from the Hovsepian Brothers and Glick Real Estate LTD., before transferring ownership to the Ashland County Park District.

It is not important who owns the land. It's important that the land is preserved," said Cheryl Harner, president of GMAS.

The land changed hands through a conservation easement held by North Central Ohio Land Conservancy Inc. Certain restrictions were placed on the property by

GMAS, limiting what form of development of the land may take.

Developments involving minimal natural damage are permitted, allowing for the creation of a main access drive, an informational kiosk, a small observation area, a parking lot and a boardwalk. Plans also include future construction of a bikeway and a canoe and kayak launching site, in an effort to connect the four parks situated along the Jerome River.

This is a very high quality ecosystem to not only enjoy but use in education. It's an excellent educational resource for nature lovers and also the Ashland City School District," said Weyrick.

Louise Fleming, a former President of the park district, spearheaded the wetlands effort, driven by a desire to preserve nature as development flourishes. Fleming, who began working at Ashland University 17 years ago, passed the wetlands area in her daily commute.

"Every day, I would drive down interstate 71 and see the wetlands and I always thought this would be a great wetlands preserve," said Fleming. "With development, I realized the wetlands might not be here."

The wetlands project, which has been two years in the making, was financed in part through a grant for \$279,280 from the Clean

Ohio Conservation Fund. Several local players covered the remaining cost of the property, including Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Pheasants Forever and Weyrick, among others. The two previous landowners also contributed financially to the purchase.

Members of GMAS and the park district hope to preserve will serve as a draw not only to the community but also to tourist.

"It will attract a whole new market of visitor who may not have considered coming here before. These visitors will have yet another a reason to stay the night and spend their dollars in our communities, which will boost Ashland's economy," Amy Daubenspeck, executive director of Ashland Area Convention and Visitors bureau, wrote in a letter to the grants committee.

The preserve is rated as a Category three wetlands by the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, meaning the area has superior wetlands integrity.

Additionally, the wetlands area is home to the American sweet flag – a perennial plant threatened in the state – and the Virginia Rail- a species of marsh bird also scarce in Ohio.

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