

# The Lowell Ledger

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## Environmentalist and philanthropist sets example for the country

*Driving around the countryside in Vergennes and Grattan townships you may have noticed the bright green signs with a red barn. These signs designate preserved farmland as well as conservation easements donated by environmentalist and philanthropist Peter Wege.*

*We have been following the stories of these farmers who decided to preserve their farmland for future generations. Today we bring you the story of a man who has been working for the last 40 years to make this happen.*



Peter Wege



By Emma Palova

As a former World War II pilot flying from Dallas in a training plane, Peter Wege wanted to stop in Pittsburgh, but he couldn't find it in the smog in the middle of the day.

That was long before caring for the environment became a modern trend.

Concerned then as he remains today, Wege, 88, is a true visionary looking beyond the horizons.

"That jarred me," he said, "what are we doing."

Sitting at a community breakfast in Wege's honor for his preservation efforts at the Franciscan Life Process Center last week, one couldn't help but be touched by his presence.

"We should have been preserving since 1950," said Wege. "It should be as normal as kindergarten. It has taken us 40 years to get it started."

Inspired by Health, Education and Welfare Secretary John Gardner, Wege embarked on a lifelong mission to save the planet in 1967. Wege backed his passion for the environment with money through the Wege Foundation established in

honor of his parents Peter Martin and Sophia Louise Wege.

"We need to do things for the civilization," he said. "We have to come together to preserve the planet."

Surrounded by area farming families and environmentalists amidst the rolling fields of Vergennes Township, an area he so much loves, Wege has seen the results of his work in action.

A total of 1,000 acres

along the Parnell Corridor has been preserved through a combination of Wege's donation of conservation easements and his funding of the purchase of development rights program.

"Without you Mr. Wege, this would not have been possible," said Rick Chapla of Land Conservancy of West Michigan, echoing the sentiment of all those present.

Area farming families the Heffrons, the Seifs

and the Merrimans were honored during the breakfast for putting their land into the farmland preservation program.

And like the rippling effort of a pebble thrown into water, Wege's preservation efforts are spreading around. Farmers Marsha Wilcox and Steve Koning are in line to have their farms preserved. Betty Jo Crosby of Ada Township

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The Heffron family receives a green farmland preservation sign. Heffrons were one of the first to preserve in Grattan Township.



# Wege, continued ... *From Page 1*

has donated a conservation easement.

"We need to set an example for the rest of the country," said Wege.

Following the presentation, Wege spoke naturally about his love of the land and what needs to be done to preserve it. He believes that politicians should be involved in preserving the environment.

"The population is going out of control," he said. "farmland is incredibly important."

In June, Wege will be speaking to 200 mayors from all over the country in Grand Rapids with the hope of spreading the word.

"This effort has to grow through meetings," he said.

His focus is on saving the Great Lakes through the Healing Our Waters Coalition backed by several U.S. legislators. It targets eight Great Lakes states and two Canadian provinces. Education remains one of the most important pillars of his foundation.

After sowing the seeds of environmental education locally with the Wege Wittenbach Center and the Goodville Nature Center, Wege wants his message to go world wide.

"My goal is to get the leading colleges of the world together," he said.

Already the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Western Michigan University,

Alma College and Aquinas College are backing Wege's effort.

"We have to think about what are we doing to this country," he said.

Wege, who is also a poet and a lover of arts, has authored two books about environment. He has coined the term 'Economicology' for striking a balance between economics and ecology.

**Environmentalist and philanthropist Peter Wege accepts recognition from Rick Chapla.**

