**Background: GHI Yard Task Force/Other Planned Communities**

The GHI Board of Directors established the Yard Solutions for a 21st Century Garden City Task Force (Yards Task Force--YTF) on June 9, 2016.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The Architectural Review Committee proposed the Task Force[[2]](#endnote-2), and the Woodlands Committee endorsed it. The Ad Hoc Historic Preservation Task Force also proposed a yard solutions working group to complement that task force’s work in “fostering the preservation of historic elements for the GHI community,” specifically the built structures, while the YTF would examine “soft” landscaping details such as fences, sheds, and plantings[[3]](#endnote-3)

Such an exploration of GHI yard needs and possibilities had never been done. Greenbelt’s original Garden City plan,[[4]](#endnote-4) while utopian, did not envision 21st century changes in household and community life nor in environmental science. Needs for sheds, fences and privacy screens have grown. Water conservation, watershed protection, and avoidance of invasive plants were not part of the original vision. With the Homes Improvement Program (HIP) well underway—and the resulting improved appearance of homes—it was time to turn attention to the “soft” aspects of GHI.

The mandate of the YTF was:

* To help members enjoy their yards more and in new ways – for seating, play areas, pollinator gardens and other appropriate uses.
* To explore ways of becoming a greener community.
* To propose changes to GHI rules that provide for more options in screening and other yard improvements, which complement our architecture while maintaining Greenbelt's historic openness.
* To ensure that GHI rules pertaining to members’ yards are easy to understand and procedures for GHI approval, where necessary, are easy to follow.
* To compile examples of garden styles, features and plants that work in GHI yards and provide other forms of guidance.

The Board later requested the YTF to “analyze GHI’s community beautification inspection program and recommend improvements that should be made.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

**Guiding Principles of the Yards Task Force**

**Conformity with the GHI Vision and Mission** Statements[[6]](#endnote-6) is foremost in the YTF’s activities. Standards relevant to yards, gardens, and common areas receive particular attention: **well maintained** homes; an **attractive** community; a **customer focus**; **quality** homes; respect for **the historical legacy and ideals of the original Greenbelt plan**; maintenance, protection and enhancement of the **open space plan** (woods, walkways, playgrounds); and preservation of the **sustainability** of the community.

Recognition of the **social, economic and cultural developments** that have affected GHI’s “cultural landscape”[[7]](#endnote-7) over time also guide the YTF. (As a National Historic Landmark Historic Greenbelt/GHI is considered a cultural landscape due to the intact nature of the community as originally planned.) Major changes such as the increasingly negative impacts of human activity on the environment and frequent and often misunderstood changes in GHI rules governing what members can and cannot modify in their yards—call for a **“big picture”** approach that takes into account 21st century realities and looks to the future.

The Yards Task Force agrees with the statements of the GHI Ad-Hoc Historic Preservation Task Force. “The [Ad-Hoc Historic Preservation] Task Force notes that an interest in continuing to preserve a historic community does not require “freezing” the appearance of the community at a particular point in history…GHI has done a great job of surviving while evolving, which is the ultimate goal of historic preservation. ..The Task Force feels that **growth, sustainability, and future changes to our community are not at odds with historic preservation.”[[8]](#endnote-8)**

The importance of an informed **stewardship of GHI’s natural resources** in the form of its yards, gardens and common areas and across members and staff directs the overall YTF efforts. In the words of the GHI Mission, “We are the keepers of our property, and we have the right to expect that all of us will act responsibly to protect and care for that which each own and treasure together.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

**Process**

To accomplish its mandate, the YTF:

1. Conducted and analyzed a voluntary member survey of members’ needs, wants, and concerns regarding their own yards and GHI common areas. While not a representative sample, the YTF received 175 responses and many valuable suggestions. [[10]](#endnote-10)
2. Interviewed GHI staff, expert members and outside specialists in issues pertaining to GHI yards and gardens, including historic preservation, landscape architects, horticulturalists, and experts in environmental management.
3. Through a literature review and online research, including historic preservation standards and guidelines, sought further examples of potential yard problems/needs and possible solutions.
4. Explored the lessons learned from other planned communities influenced by the Garden City movement[[11]](#endnote-11) and the town of Radburn, NJ, designed as a “Town for the Motor Age” in the late 1920s[[12]](#endnote-12)--both of which were fundamental inspirations for Greenbelt.[[13]](#endnote-13)
5. Studied proposed solutions and collected images of and information about the pros and cons of each (including cost and upkeep).

**Vision**

* A healthier, safer and more environmentally-friendly community, achieved through the benefits of conservation landscaping: more trees, shrubs and perennials and less lawn; healthier air quality and reduced air pollution; wildlife habitat; water conservation; healthy soils; energy conservation; reduced waste; minimal use of toxic pesticides and fertilizers;[[14]](#endnote-14) and the positive health effects of gardening, including: consumption of home-grown foods; reductions in depression, anxiety, and body mass index, as increases in life satisfaction, quality of life, and sense of community.[[15]](#endnote-15) [Note: The safe and healthful lifestyle of the residents was the “most important” goal of the original Greenbelt plan. [[16]](#endnote-16)]
* More options for members to enjoy their yards for gardening, experiencing nature, recreation, relaxation, and socializing, while enhancing the original architecture of homes and iconic openness in the community plan.
* Increased visual appeal of the community: beautification.
* Member-friendly and instructive processes and procedures for putting yard and garden changes into place.

**Other Yard Task Force Responses to Survey Results**

**GHI processes**: 69 reported dissatisfaction with GHI procedures for making changes to member yards. Rules unclear as to what's allowed and what not, e.g., lattice. Approval process for changes is sometimes unreasonable. Reasons for being cited in beautification inspection not clear or unknown. Task Force actions: included in its Report to Board and recommended changes to Community Beautification Program.

**Sheds**Comments about wanting more flexibility wanted as to location.  38 members not happy with the size of their shed. Refer this information to ARC.

**Drainage**: 72 respondents not satisfied with drainage/swales situation, with many complaints. Refer survey results to Stormwater Management Task Force.

**Animal problems**: 109 reported being bothered by aggressive or noisy dogs. Additional complaints of free-roaming cats, dog and cat waste – especially the smell the waste makes when not removed. Respondents also need help with preventing/controlling deer, mosquitoes, chiggers, moles, etc. Task Force responses: included in Report to Board and recommended changes to Community Beautification Program, plus referral of survey results to Companion Animal Committee.

**Laundry lines:** Want more flexibility as to service/garden side. 24 say they want to change the location of their line. No YTF action.  
 **Junk/trash** **in neighbor's yards**:  145 reported they were bothered by trash/debris in yards, primarily trashy and unkempt yards, with one complaint about junky-looking compost bins. Complaints that GHI enforcement is insufficient and inconsistent. Task Force response is included in recommendations for improvements in Community Beautification Program.  
  
**Sidewalks**: Complaints about sidewalks not being cleared of plant debris and overgrown plants. Tripping hazards from poor maintenance of the sidewalk mentioned (21 members not satisfied with maintenance of the sidewalk itself.) 57 want more lighting. Task Force responses included in Report to Board and recommended improvements in Community Beautification Program.

**For Reference: How Other Planned Communities Handle these Issues**

**Screening/Hedges/Private Spaces**

Radburn (a community that served as a model for Greenbelt) received criticism for failing to provide families with sufficient space for semi-private outdoor use or personalization. One consequence of this lack of private space has been residents’ attempts to “hide” behind garden side hedges that have grown above eye level, thus defeating the original plan of openness to a central park area—a problem also seen in GHI.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Not all Garden City movement-inspired communities contemporaneous with Greenbelt lacked private outdoor spaces. Village Green in Los Angeles (formerly Baldwin Hills Village), planned and built about the same time as Greenbelt, with consulting inputs from Charles Stein, the same planner who inspired the design of Greenbelt, included enclosed patios in most of its 1, 2, and 3 bedroom garden apartments—a first time for large-scale rental housing. The realization that residents preferred the private patios and close-to-their-home garden courts over the larger common areas was noticeable early on. Stein vowed to improve upon private spaces in subsequent Garden City plans. [[18]](#endnote-18)

The post-World War II Wildwood Park in Manitoba represents a later evolution of the “garden city” by maintaining the central park area as the “garden side” (or front yard) while allowing residents to shape service side according to their needs. These back yards are very diverse, reflecting varying interests of the occupants. These service side “scapes” are also more socially interactive than the parkland.[[19]](#endnote-19)

**On plantings/preserving/updating original landscape**

Village Green in Los Angeles has also faced challenges in the management of its original landscape. As the site matured, many original trees grew to the extent that their canopies (as well as the sun and shade conditions they produce) are very different from the original design intent. Some trees are suffering from old age, some of the original plant choices were not appropriate to the environmental conditions of the region, and random plantings have resulted in the introduction of undesirable species. The homeowners’ association is now embarking on the development of a systematic vegetation management plan to deal with the long-term evolution and management of this “great American designed landscape.” [[20]](#endnote-20)

The Garden Cities envisioned by Ebenezer Howard and the subsequent New Townes in the United Kingdom mark more than a century of large-scale, comprehensively planned new communities. A recent review of lessons learned from these experience points out that “the extensive green space in Garden Cities and New Towns, which was intended to improve their attractiveness and the quality of life they offered, now has the added benefit of serving as a valuable tool in climate change adaptation and mitigation.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

1. Minutes Board of Directors GHI Regular Open Session July 6, 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Minutes GHI Board of Directors June 2, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Report of the Ad-Hoc Historic Preservation Task Force to the Board of Directors of Greenbelt Homes Inc. No date. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Howard, Ebenezer. Garden Cities of Tomorrow (being the second edition of “Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform”). London: S. Sonnenschein and Co., Ltd. 1902 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Minutes Board of Directors GHI Regular Open Session August 3, 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Vision: “We will provide affordable, **well maintained** homes in an **attractive** cooperative community.  We will create a **customer-focused** culture in which members and employees are treated with the same level of respect, courtesy and attention that we would personally expect.”

   Mission: is a cooperative that provides **quality** homes for our members and fosters opportunities for community. We will accomplish this by celebrating and respecting **the historical legacy and ideals of the original Greenbelt plan**.

   We will maintain, protect and enhance the assets of our cooperative including the buildings, architectural design, **open space plan** (woods, walkways, playgrounds), while preserving the financial stability and **sustainability** of our cooperative community.

   We will promote member diversity, member and community involvement, and **education** regarding our rights and responsibilities as co-op members.

   We are the keepers of our property, and we have the right to expect that all of us will act responsibly to protect and care for that which each own and treasure together.” https://www.ghi.coop/content/about-ghi [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A cultural landscape is "a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values." Birnbaum, Charles. Protecting Cultural Landscapes:Planning, Treatment and Management of Historic Landscapes. Preservation Brief 36, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resources Preservation Assistance. 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Report of the Ad-Hoc Historic Preservation Task Force to The Board of Directors of Greenbelt Homes Inc., 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. GHI Mission and Vision. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Copies of the full report of findings and the survey questionnaire are available upon request. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Howard, Ebenezer. Garden Cities of Tomorrow (being the second edition of “Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform”). London: S. Sonnenschein and Co., Ltd. 1902. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Martin, Michael D. Returning to Radburn, Landscape Journal · January 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission*, Greenbelt Historic District Study,* Upper Marlboro, MD, February 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. University of Maryland Cooperative Extension. Conservation Landscaping. Extension Bulletin EB-0370 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ## Soga, M, Gaston, KJ, Yamaura, Y. Gardening is beneficial for health: A meta-analysis, Preventive Medicine Reports, Vol.5, March 2017, Pages 92-99

    [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Greenbelt Historic District Guidelines, Feb. 2004 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Martin, Michael D. Returning to Radburn, Landscape Journal · January 2001 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Architectural Resources Group, Inc. for the Village Green Owners’ Association. The Village Green. Historic Structures Report. 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Martin, Michael D. ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The Cultural Landscape Foundation. Baldwin Hills Village (Village Green) Serenity in Southern California. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Town and Country Planning Association. Re-imagining Garden Cities for the 21st Century: Benefits and Lessons in Bringing forward Comprehensively Planned New Communities. 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)