Committed to Clean Water
The Saginaw Bay begins 50 miles inland, where the Au Gres and Rifle rivers start their flow toward Lake Huron. Together these waterways make up an ecosystem that helps determine the economic, environmental and recreational well-being of Northeast Michigan. The communities of Rose City, West Branch and Au Gres know this better than anyone; Huron Pines first began working with the residents of these cities because of their strong ties to natural resources and their commitment to the environment.

In 2012, Huron Pines started work to reduce the flow of polluted stormwater into the Rifle River system with projects in West Branch and Rose City. The success of those projects was built on community input and collaboration, and laid the foundation for the future of coastal stormwater work at Huron Pines. Starting with a stormwater assessment in the city of Au Gres in 2018, Huron Pines plans to move up the entire northern Lake Huron coast in the coming months and years to ensure safer, cleaner water for people and wildlife to enjoy.

When an entire community is involved in the restoration and protection of their resources, the impact is immeasurable. In addition to successfully completing restoration and improvement projects, what results is a strong foundation for long-term environmental sustainability. When a city council or a group of fourth-grade students begins to look at the world with a conservation mindset, the future of natural resource protection improves.

Preserving Clean Water in the Rifle River

The Rifle River project was a priority because of both its community benefit and environmental impact. According to Mike Kelly, manager of the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN), a conservation fund established to protect the Saginaw Bay, natural resource protection is fundamental to the quality of life and economic well-being of West Branch and Rose City. “Whether it’s Houghton Creek or the Rifle River, both support a high-quality fishery that brings people from throughout the state to come and fish for trout,” Kelly said. The Rifle and its tributaries also attract outdoor enthusiasts with opportunities for camping, canoeing and kayaking.

Because the health of the region’s natural resources is so integral to the surrounding communities, Huron Pines worked closely with residents and local...
organizations to plan and implement clean water solutions including the installation of six rain gardens that naturally filter pollution from stormwater and snowmelt before it can reach nearby streams. The largest rain garden was built at Ogemaw Heights High School and involved participation across the West Branch-Rose City Area School District.

Building a Conservation Mindset

West Branch-Rose City School Superintendent Philip Mikulski said the rain garden project was about more than building a garden, it was a teaching opportunity. “Our kids are doing great things—this rain garden is one thing they do and educationally we’re doing everything we can to teach them about the environment and their impact, and I think they are taking it to heart.”

High School student Brady Zettle helped build the garden and said his favorite part of the project was, “giving back to the community and seeing how we can make this rain garden make the Rifle River a little bit healthier.”

Two of the major garden construction days took place in 95-degree summer heat. “It was a ton of work, and it wasn’t just students and staff. It was a ton of community members,” said Debra Abraham, assistant to the superintendent, who was very involved in the entire garden process and helped with construction. “It was hard work, but it was great.”

In addition to the community rain gardens, Huron Pines worked with West Branch and Rose City to install mechanical oil and grit separators in each city to filter pollution from stormwater runoff and completed over 800 feet of streambank restoration work along Houghton Creek and the Rifle River to reduce erosion and prevent excess sediment from entering the water.

Protecting Water Quality Along the Coast

Taking lessons from West Branch and Rose City, Huron Pines has expanded its stormwater efforts and is applying them to the Northeast Michigan coast. Beach closures on Lake Huron are on the rise, some due to pollution that is the direct result of untreated stormwater runoff entering the water in high volumes after heavy rainfalls or other major weather events. Our goal is for every coastal community to benefit from the environmental, recreational and economic gains that come from a well-executed stormwater plan.

The spring of 2018 marked the start of our latest stormwater project in Au Gres on the Saginaw Bay. The initial stormwater assessment is funded by Saginaw Bay WIN and the Bay Area Community Foundation with support from the community and the Au Gres-Sims School District. For years, Huron Pines has been working with volunteers, organizations, administrators and teachers to build programs that help students become stewards of the Great Lakes through river investigations and field visits to Big Charity Island, part of Michigan Islands National Wildlife Refuge.
“We have a lot of our kids who don’t necessarily like to learn from a book per se or from a computer, but absolutely love the opportunity to be able to go outside and get their hands dirty and learn from nature,” said Chad Zeien, K-12 principal at Au Gres-Sims.

“Besides the educational benefits, it’s a benefit to the community,” added Brook Begres, fourth-grade teacher at Au Gres-Sims. “They’re learning that, just because I’m a little fourth-grader doesn’t mean I can’t help my environment and community.”

Huron Pines comes together with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Au Gres-Sims School District, Brown’s Landing, Charity Island Transport, Inc., Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative Network, Michigan Natural Features Inventory, Michigan Sea Grant, Michigan State University Extension, Saginaw Bay Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area and Saginaw Valley State University to make these field experiences possible for the students.

The new stormwater project in Au Gres will continue to strengthen the connection between students, the environment and the community. The school has already expressed interest in integrating a rain garden project into the Au Gres-Sims curriculum as part of the stormwater improvement plan that will come as a result of the initial stormwater assessment.

Building a Better Future for the Great Lakes

Clean water and green infrastructure are the future of coastal conservation in Michigan. As we partner with more communities and continue to build a school stormwater curriculum, we are helping to ensure a better future for the Great Lakes. This is our water quality legacy.

A planned legacy gift to Huron Pines ensures that these projects and hundreds of others across Northeast Michigan can become a reality. By naming Huron Pines in an estate plan or securing a planned gift to benefit Huron Pines, your legacy and passion for water quality will live through our work forever. For more information on how to leave a planned gift or to learn more about our Legacy Giving Society please contact our Executive Director Brad Jensen at (989) 448-2293 ext. 18.