

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONSERVATION SUBDIVISION DEVELOPMENT

Summarized by Steven Rodie, ASLA

Assoc. Prof. /Landscape Horticulture Specialist, UNL

(402) 554-3752 srodie@unomaha.edu

THE CONCEPT

- Conservation subdivisions are in essence golf course communities without the golf course
 - **Visual**/physical access to open space
 - **Same** economics dynamics (small lot with access to a shared amenity commands a premium price)
- Conservation subdivisions are density **independent** (more lots @ smaller size)
- **Dedicated** open space is a prime consideration
 - 40% to 60% of buildable land a common figure; can vary
 - *“To achieve the maximum conservation benefits, the conservation subdivision should be designed to **complement a larger network of green infrastructure**. A well-designed conservation subdivision will maintain **contiguous blocks of open space** that connect to open space on adjacent parcels. The protected area should have **high resource conservation value**. This may include riparian corridors, greenways, prime agricultural land or scenic vistas.”* (Reference #1, <http://www.swircd.org/pdf/conservation%20subdivision%20design%20handbook.pdf>)

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

- Conservation subdivision design offers economic benefits to residents, developers, local governments and the community: (Reference #2, <http://www.landchoices.org/EconomicAdvantages.htm>)
 1. **Lower costs** compared to *traditional subdivision development, while **accommodating the same number of homes**.
 2. **More profitable and faster selling development** in many cases
 3. **Faster home appreciation**
 4. **Helps to preserve the tourism economy** by preserving land, wildlife and rural character
 5. **Smoother review process**
 6. **Protects water quality**, reducing or eliminating the need for expensive stormwater pollution treatment
 7. **Reduced infrastructure construction costs**
 8. **Reduced infrastructure maintenance costs**
 9. **Reduced demand for publicly funded land and open space**
 10. **Enhances the property values of nearby parcels and neighboring properties**
 11. **Marketing and sales advantage** as developers and realtors can highlight distinct benefits such as open space, views, wildlife and trails

**Traditional subdivision development is defined as the typical subdivision design whereas the entire or nearly entire parcel of land is cleared of trees and vegetation, leveled and the entire property is filled with houselots and street, leaving nothing in a natural state except for unbuildable wetlands, floodplains and steep slopes.*

- Conservation subdivision design can reduce costs (Reference #3, <http://landchoices.org/Landownersanddevelopers.htm>)
 - *By respecting natural terrain and designing around existing site features on an 80-lot development in Texas, Randall Arendt cut grading costs by 83%, from \$300,000 to \$50,000, compared with a conventionally engineered plan.*
 - *One of Mr. Arendt's recent designs is credited by an Indiana developer as having added at least \$20,000 of value to each of his 40-lots (\$800,000 total value added), while still providing for full development density.*

OTHER BENEFITS - FOCUS ON DEVELOPER (Reference #1, <http://www.swircd.org/pdf/conservation%20subdivision%20design%20handbook.pdf>)

Potential benefits of conservation subdivisions

	Developer
Smoother review/approval process ¹	x
Reduced stormwater runoff; less need for stormwater management facilities ¹	x
Reduced maintenance costs for roads (resurfacing, snow removal) and pipes ¹	
Built-in community identity and marketing strategy	x
Reduced demand for new public parkland* ¹	
Access to active and passive recreation areas* ¹	
Opportunities for community interaction ¹	
Adjacent property values are upheld ¹	
CSD homes appreciate faster than homes in conventional subdivisions ¹	
CSD homes sell faster than homes in conventional subdivisions ²	x
CSD developments are more profitable than conventional subdivisions ²	x
Greenbelt linkages for wildlife and pedestrians at no cost to taxpayers ¹	
Streams are buffered; pollution is reduced, water quality improves ¹	

¹ Arendt, 1996; ² Mohamed, 2006

*These benefits for municipalities and citizens may be realized by granting public access to the subdivision's protected open space.

THE LIMITATIONS

- Reality Check (Reference #4, <http://www.landchoices.org/EcoSystemMktpIcFinal.pdf>)

Conservation developments look really good on paper. Land is preserved, homes are being built, the economy of an area continues to grow and all parties end up happy, prosperous and satisfied. Yet being green and saving open space means that these cutting edge developers frequently face obstacles from governments and the public that traditional builders don't encounter.

"For developments like these to succeed you need a unique environment to work in," says Kim Chapman, principal ecologist with the Applied Ecological Services in Prior Lake, Minnesota. "Specifically you need a partnership between 3 major actors in the development process: the developer, the regulatory and permitting community, and the land advocacy community," Chapman explains. "If any one of these partners is not involved, it's common to see conservation developments not get built."

"Conservation subdivisions face a simple marketing problem." "Officials, those who do zoning and permitting, simply have never heard of it. And if the public doesn't understand it, they aren't going to buy it."

Community/Developer Motivations and Disincentives (Reference #1, <http://www.swircd.org/pdf/conservation%20subdivision%20design%20handbook.pdf>)

<p>Community Motivations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lower impact to local water quality and natural environment Ability to retain significant local features and rural views Reduced infrastructure, reduced maintenance costs Room for negotiation with developers to address special site conditions of concern to the community 	<p>Developer Motivations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential to produce a quality product that will sell well Potential for reduced infrastructure costs Flexibility to develop in a way that avoids costly difficult building areas Possibility to increase number of homes, depending on regulations and bonuses
<p>Community Disincentives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning curve; need to be more educated in order to negotiate well Resistance to change in a long-established way of doing things Closer spacing of homes may be perceived as a density increase Criticism for exclusion; lack of affordable homes 	<p>Developer Disincentives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extended approval process may be required Unknown elements of design approaches Depending on zoning and calculations, potential to decrease net number of homes permitted

- Implementation Strategies – Who Takes Care of What? (Reference #1, <http://www.swircd.org/pdf/conservation%20subdivision%20design%20handbook.pdf>)

	GOOD	BETTER	BEST
Open Space			
Protection	Homeowners association agreement	Municipality holds a conservation easement	Third party holds a conservation easement
Maintenance	Homeowners association	Homeowners association follows a management plan developed and approved by a resource conservation professional	Homeowners association follows a management plan and is checked for compliance by a third party such as the easement holder, SWCD, or other appropriate professional

Access	Accessible to residents and their guests	Accessible to residents, guests, and adjacent landowners	Accessible to the public as part of a trail and greenway network
Conservation value	Athletic playing fields or manicured grass	Agricultural fields or recent restoration projects (ex. Conservation Reserve Program)	Established forest and prairie
Municipal Regulations			
Planning	Encouraging conservation design in initial meetings with developers	Establishing conservation design areas as part of a land use/comprehensive plan	Coordination of local land use/comprehensive plan with neighboring municipalities and county/regional greenspace plans
Zoning	Conservation development allowed as a conditional use	PUD or overlay zone to allow greater flexibility in developments	Establishment of a conservation subdivision zone
Ordinances	Conservation design is allowed under PUD framework	Conservation design is encouraged through incentives	Conservation design is required on sensitive areas as identified in the comprehensive plan
Design criteria	Number of lots determined by yield plan method; use objective standards hard numbers, measurements and percentages	Number of lots determined by formula; use objective standards but allow some exceptions; use ranges of numbers and percentages; allow some bonuses	Flexibility in the number of lots, close collaboration between municipal staff and developer, holistic review of the design for best use of the site

THE CHANGING PARADIGM

- *Practitioners tap into the search for alternatives to traditional suburbs (Realtor Magazine, 10/01/06)* (Reference #5, <http://www.landchoices.org/RealtorMagazine.htm>)
- *“A study of values and priorities in choosing a home site conducted in Michigan concludes that “nature view from home” was by far the highest priority for residents of conservation subdivisions and conventional subdivisions. The study also concludes that conservation subdivision residents had a far higher level of satisfaction with the nearby environment than their counterparts in conventional subdivisions.”* (Reference #6, <http://www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/print.php?Releases/2004/Jun04/r062904a>)
- **Myth/Truth about what Homeowners want** (Reference #7, <http://www.landchoices.org/Myths.htm>)

MYTH: Most homebuyers want a large McMansion style home on a large lot in a large lot subdivision.

TRUTH: *“America's love affair with sprawling homes is showing signs of waning as the real-estate market softens and aging boomers seek smaller houses. Our reporter on nervous sellers and the growing supply of 'faux*

chateaux." From The Wall Street Journal (June 16, 2006).

Studies and actual cases point out that lots in conservation subdivisions often sell faster than lots in conventional and large lot subdivisions. For example, lots on lakes and golf courses normally are a bit smaller and they often are the fastest selling real estate.

There may always be a certain segment of the market that may still want a home in a large lot subdivision. Conservation subdivisions may not be for everyone, but once most people are exposed to the high quality of life in a conservation subdivision, they often purchase a home in a conservation subdivision and become proponents of the design.

America is seeing a surge of home buyers who want all the amenities they are used to, but also want a smaller home in order to reduce payments, utility costs, upkeep, and free up more time to enjoy life. They also may want to downsize and free up more money from their primary residence in order to purchase a second vacation home. More and more home buyers also want views of open space and access to parks and natural areas for a higher quality of life.

- Who does the work?
 - Integrated teams of design professionals
 - Landscape architects often not included in standard subdivision layout; as uniquely trained design professionals, need to be involved with all scales of Conservation Subdivision Design