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Intentional Grounding

As conservation subdivisions emerge, sellers, buyers, and even NIMBYs find set-aside plans they support.

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By Teresa Burney

A decade ago, Randall Arendt felt a bit like the lone voice in the wilderness, crying out that profitable land development and environmental preservation don't have to be mutually exclusive. Today, the landscape planner, site designer, author, and lecturer feels more like Johnny Appleseed as the “conservation subdivisions” he has advocated sprout up across the country. Arendt, the sole practitioner at Greener Prospects consulting, has to turn down work almost as often as he takes it on.

Conservation subdivisions set aside large tracts—often half the property or more—of prime land within a parcel for preservation from development. The rest of the land is developed more densely, sometimes as traditional neighborhood developments. “The overall density is going to be the same” as if the land were developed traditionally, says Arendt. Developers like that.

Conservationists, too, tend to support the developments because prime lands—not just unbuildable wetlands—are preserved from development forever. And residents seem to like them enough to pay a premium for homes on small lots with the promise of acres of pristine land accessible to all.

ASSETS GROW

Arendt calls conservation subdivisions “twice green” because they succeed both environmentally and economically. “They make money for three reasons,” says Arendt. “First, they don't have to move as much dirt,” he says. Leaving land in its natural state or only building trails through it is far cheaper than building subdivision infrastructure or even a golf course, which costs a lot to build and maintain. Most people who live on golf courses don't play golf anyway, they just enjoy the open space. Second, with denser development, streets and utility runs are shorter. Third,

CONSERVATION SUBDIVISIONS: Leaving land in its natural state or building trails through it is cheaper than

they sell faster at premium prices, according to Arendt's own experience. Studies show as much, too.

building infrastructure or golf courses.

One of Arendt's designs in North Florida—Centerville, near Tallahassee—recently sold 86 of the 87 lots in its first phase within the first seven hours. At Centerville, about 70 percent of the former 975-acre hunting plantation will be preserved, with 200 homes on the remaining 30 percent. Centerville isn't the only example of conservation planning in Florida. WilsonMiller, a Naples, Fla.-based planning, design, and engineering firm has been hired by a number of developers of tens of thousands of acres in the fast-growing state.

They are charged with finding profitable ways to develop the land while conserving habitat, discouraging suburban sprawl, and appeasing rising opposition to growth. One of the most prominent examples is the entire east side of Collier County in Southwest Florida, where about 200,000 acres is expected to be developed under new state legislation called Rural Lands Stewardship. The owners of the huge chunks of agricultural land are able to sell their development rights to land developers interested in building denser subdivisions.

An extensive study was done to assess parcels that should be protected from development and others where development could be clustered. This isn't a granola exercise," says Andrea Tyson, vice president of strategic planning at WilsonMiller. "This is capitalism mated with conservation. This one works for everybody. The landholder doesn't lose because the land doesn't get ripped away. He gets paid for credits that are used in an area that allows for more density. The developer gets his value because he is allowed to get higher density. And this is all at the cost of growth, not at the cost of the tax payer."

Planners are hoping the result will be less sprawl, more open space, and preservation of the considerable agricultural land in the area. This helps implement a sustainable future for Florida, says Jim Paulmann, a vice president and principal at WilsonMiller. "This helps protect natural resources, support the continuation of agriculture, while at the same time, allowing sustainable growth and development," he says.

Ground was broken on the first project under the program, a new Catholic university and town between Naples and Immokalee called Ave Maria, developed by Barron Collier Company and sponsored by Dominos Pizza founder and former Detroit Tigers owner Thomas S. Monaghan. The development rights transferred to the Ave Maria site allowed for 1,700 acres nearby to be set aside for preservation.

FAULTY LOGIC

There are other hotbeds of conservation subdivisions around the country, says Dale Dean, marketing manager of Applied Ecological Services, a Wisconsin-based ecological consulting, contracting, and restoration firm with a growing business in conservation developments. Applied Ecological Services worked with one of the pioneering conservation subdivisions, Prairie Crossing, in Lake County, Ill. "In a nutshell, we see that the whole planning situation for development needs to be turned on its head," says Dean. "Instead of looking at the environmental worth of the land last, you consider that first." In the Midwest, that means setting aside or restoring portions of

prairie rapidly disappearing to development, he says.

Since conservation developments must be tailor-made to fit the land, each subdivision will look different. They require developers to hire more environmental conservation planners and assessors. Some are developed in conjunction with traditional neighborhood developments and town centers. Others have homes placed on large lots surrounded by even larger areas of green space. While conservation development is definitely spreading, “I wouldn't say it's generally been accepted,” says Dean. And some developers who are embracing the concept aren't taking it on because it's the right environmental choice, he says.

“They are doing it because they are seeing it as a marketing edge. It's not the traditional thing that people are doing,” he says. The practice certainly helped Colorado-based developer McStain Neighborhoods compete with the big builders, says founder Tom Hoyt. “I don't care if you believe in this philosophically or not, but if you want to be the developer of choice [among certain landholders and municipalities] now you had better be in it,” he says. “It's a way to get entitlements in a difficult environment.”

Conservation subdivisions are becoming more common because of a confluence of circumstances, says Ed McMahon, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute. There is growing opposition to development among the citizenry, increasing difficulty of gaining entitlements and acceptance by buyers of denser-developed traditional neighborhood developments.

Plus, home buyers just like having access to open space, McMahon says. “Take a 200-acre farm, and the zoning is one house per two acres,” says McMahon. You could do a conventional development with 100, two-acre lots. Or you could do 100, one-acre lots with 100 acres of open space. You have a competitive advantage now. The buyer is not just buying a house, he is buying 100 acres of open space, and people will pay what we call a green space premium to live next to green space... I think they are onto something.”

Slow the Flow

Less invasive stormwater treatment emulates nature and can save infrastructure costs.

Imagine building a subdivision with no underground storm sewers and streets with no curbs. That's the approach Applied Ecological Services has been recommending for its conservation subdivision developments.

Instead of traditional engineered stormwater treatment systems, AES has been using its trademarked Stormwater Treatment Train method, designed to handle run off more naturally. As a bonus, the method saves developers millions in construction costs and brings in millions more by creating a more aesthetically pleasing development that buyers are willing to pay premiums for, says Steve Apfelbaum, AES's president.

“On the economic side, we are saving 15 to 54 percent on the costs of development and creating 30 to 50 percent land premiums,” says Apfelbaum. “That's what we've been able to document.”

The Stormwater Treatment Train method is a 180-degree turn from traditional stormwater management techniques. The Treatment Train slows down flow instead of building concrete

systems designed to move water off land and into wetlands and water bodies quickly, gathering pollutants along the way and allowing little chance for natural systems to filter the runoff.

“The way nature historically manages storm-water is that it holds onto it with great stinginess,” Apfelbaum says. Rainwater either soaks in where it falls or slowly moves through vegetative areas, where some evaporates, some gets used by plants, which also absorbs some of the nutrients, and the rest filters through and moves on to bigger water bodies in a cleaner state.

The Stormwater Treatment Train emulates that process by maintaining as much rainfall as possible on site. In individual yards, for instance, “rain gardens” can be created in depressions where water-loving plants can grow. Other run-off channels through shallow swales are planted with diverse native vegetation, which slows the flow through the land and uses the water to grow. Any excess from the swales flows into a larger field, where it is further absorbed. The remainder flows into wetlands, which further purify it before it hits lakes, streams, or rivers.

A side effect of the process is the creation of “wonderful places for people to recreate and walk and great habitats for wildlife,” says Apfelbaum. “These are also lower maintenance conditions, which translate directly to the bottom line. Not only do we save money on storm sewers, but it saves the costs of the city maintaining costly infrastructure forever.”

The Treatment Train method works well in conservation subdivisions, where tracts of land are set aside in their natural state. But parts of the philosophy can be applied in other development types as well, says Apfelbaum. Outdated ordinances are a stumbling block toward using the Treatment Train.

“Everybody is bear-hugging the ordinances, and people aren't allowed to think objectively about what works best,” Apfelbaum says.

A look at the changes in materials prices (First Quarter Forecast)

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Asphalt Paving Mixtures & Blocks (1981:6=100)				
PPI	146.3	158.4	174.0	176.6
%CHYA	1.6	8.3	9.9	1.5
Hydraulic Cement (1982:6=100)				
PPI	155.4	175.1	189.2	190.4
%CHYA	3.2	12.7	8.0	0.7
Ready Mix Concrete (1958:1=100)				
PPI	160.1	179.5	194.4	195.8
%CHYA	5.2	12.2	8.3	0.8
Gypsum Wallboard (1965:1=100)				
PPI	232.6	229.6	226.2	223.8
%CHYA	4.0	-1.3	-1.5	-1.0
Plastic Products (Primarily Pipe) (1982=100)				
PPI	144.6	158.9	182.1	177.4
%CHYA	4.3	9.9	14.6	-2.6
Lumber (1982=100)				
PPI	203.6	198.6	198.2	197.4
%CHYA	16.8	-2.5	-0.2	-0.4
Softwood Lumber (1982=100)				
PPI	209.8	203.6	201.5	202.8
%CHYA	22.8	-3.0	-1.0	0.6
Plywood (1982=100)				
PPI	198.5	186.9	183.4	179.1
%CHYA	18.9	-5.8	-1.8	-2.3
Spot Price, Structural Shapes, Carbon Steel ($/ton)				
PPI	533.8	544.6	551.0	499.4
%CHYA	65.3	2.0	1.2	-9.4
Spot Price, Carbon Steel ($/ton)				
PPI	469.3	475.2	443.9	406.8
%CHYA	55.5	1.2	-6.6	-8.4

KEY: PPI=PRODUCERS PRICE INDEX; %CHYA=% CHANGE FROM YEAR AGO

The Price is Right

SOURCE: GLOBAL INSIGHT