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## The "Supersize My Backyard™" Campaign to Reinvent the American Subdivision



Homes with views of preserved meadow at Tryon Farm. Courtesy [Randall Arendt](#).

by Kirt Manecke

Imagine if natural lands, lakeshores, and working family farms could be preserved when new subdivisions are developed. [LandChoices](#) is a grassroots, national nonprofit organization working to reinvent the American subdivision with a Supersize My Backyard™ campaign to help communities preserve property values, community values, and family values.

The idea for starting LandChoices came to me years ago after I arrived home from college one weekend. I was shocked and heartbroken as I looked across the road from my childhood home to see what were once majestic deep oak forests, duck-filled ponds, and rolling meadows—home to deer and red fox—clear-cut and graded flat

for a new subdivision called, ironically, "The Woods of Orchard Lake." I spent many years searching for and discovering solutions to overdevelopment by attending workshops led by noted land planner Randall Arendt (now a member of LandChoices and a member of LandChoices' advisory group) on conservation design for subdivisions, and by Boston tax attorney Steve Small on preserving family lands. Later, on a shoestring budget, I founded LandChoices to help landowners and communities preserve land.

[Tryon Farm](#) in Michigan City, Indiana, is one conservation community LandChoices is highlighting during Supersize My Backyard™. 120 acres of the 170-acre former dairy farm are preserved. 150 home sites are sensitively placed on the remaining 50 acres. I recently visited Tryon Farm, walked the trails and reveled in the unmarred scenery. Trees, rolling hills, hay fields, streams, and most natural features are left intact instead of being bulldozed away. The land has character. I thought to myself, "I want to live here!" Al, the 98-year-old neighboring landowner, drives around the land in his golf cart, the back filled with apples to feed deer lingering at dusk in the preserved meadows. The land reminds me of places I enjoyed as a child.

LandChoices is letting people know that cookie cutter residential subdivisions simply aren't the only option in new housing. Supersize My Backyard™ will help shatter the notion that conventional style subdivision developments need to be the

American standard, when better, less invasive methods exist. Most people, especially those looking to build their dream home, just assume their land choices are limited to a little square plot in a sparsely-treed subdivision. LandChoices wants to give families and communities better options. Supersize My Backyard™ is providing individuals and community leaders with easy, affordable, and actionable information on how to create “conservation subdivisions” -- neighborhoods that offer a balanced approach to development while preserving 40-70 percent or more of buildable land, in addition to unbuildable wetlands, steep slopes, and floodplains.

My childhood backyard was surrounded by a beautiful forest and apple orchard, where my mother and I would spend hours hiking and walking our dogs. LandChoices wants to show people that this type of living is still attainable, even in well-developed neighborhoods.



*Hay fields and barn at Tryon Farm.*

Supersize My Backyard™ also seeks to dispel the myth among planners and developers that conservation subdivisions are costly and less profitable than standard subdivisions. In fact, according to a study by Wayne State University ([read the study here](#)), conservation subdivisions are more profitable, less costly, and faster selling than their conventional counterparts. The study shows that lots in conservation subdivisions sold in about half the time as lots in conventional subs. In addition, developers are realizing premiums of \$13,000 to \$18,000 per acre for lots in conservation subdivisions (over those in standard subdivisions).



*When was the last time you saw an undeveloped lake in a neighborhood? Courtesy Kurt Andrae.*

LandChoices' advisory group member and the developer of Tryon Farm, Eve Noonan, confirmed the study results.

“As architects and planners we designed and are building a conservation neighborhood to offer an alternative to conventional overdevelopment. Like[...]Randall Arendt, we were convinced that families would be excited about living in houses surrounded by conserved prairie, mature forests, and restored natural wetlands. We are pleased that over 70 families now own at Tryon Farm. And we have visitors who come from all over the country to ask questions or share ideas about building green in their communities. The Farm is a happy place; good for those who live here, good for Mother Nature, and good for the pocketbook!” said Noonan.

*LandChoices is offering both individuals and community planners a free, one-page fact sheet outlining the benefits of conservation subdivisions, along with a “Take Action Now” link to help them bring conservation subdivisions to their communities. For more information on this campaign please visit [www.landchoices.org](http://www.landchoices.org), and click on “Supersize My Backyard™.”*



*Homes at [Sugar Creek Preserve](#). The lack of curbs and gutters on narrow roads allows storm water to infiltrate natural lands, recharging groundwater instead of polluting area lakes and streams, to preserve clean water, and to save municipalities storm water pollution treatment costs.*

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