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JANUARY 2006

DEBORAH WYATT FELLOWS UNVEILS OUR REDESIGN, PAGE 9.

ENVIRONMENT

Conservation Subdivision

BY JEFF SMITH

When people think in a dreamy way about Northern Michigan, they think of a place like Arbutus Lake, 400 acres of blue that run in a crazy, captivating spill across the landscape. The eccentric shoreline reaches to shape narrow peninsulas, arcs to etch lagoons, narrows, widens. Adding to the lake's intrigue are high ridges that rise steeply around the shore and seem to keep the world out—a seclusion all the more remarkable considering the lake lies just 15 minutes south of Traverse City's regional-hub bustle.

Morning mist rises off Arbutus Lake.

No wonder people love Arbutus. And no wonder they turned out in opposition when a developer proposed to build 220 homes on an undeveloped 462-acre tract that embraces more than 3 miles of shoreline. Arbutus fans did what thousands of lake lovers have done before: They hired lawyers, they hired environmental consultants, they teamed with environmental activists to stall the project.

Eventually the developer pulled out because he was unable to reach agreement to renew the purchase option. But by then, both sides had spent a great deal of time and money, and both probably walked away thinking there must be a better way.

Kirt Manecke thinks he has that better way, not just for Arbutus Lake, but



It's not an oxymoron, says Kirt Manecke.

for every beautiful place in America that's slated for development. Last May, Manecke started a nonprofit company called LandChoices, based in Milford, Michigan, designed to spread the word about land preservation options. One of the most innovative and promising options he's promoting is something called the conservation subdivision—a concept he wants to borrow from conservationists and land planners and make it into a popular paradigm. Sure, conservation subdivision sounds like an oxymoron, but Manecke says it's a remarkably commonsense way to achieve the goals

of key parties involved in development: the original landowner, who wants to sell but doesn't want to see his beautiful land scraped clear for sod; the homeowner, who wants to live in a parklike setting and have a home that appreciates well; the developer, who wants timely approval of his project and a profitable outcome; and the community, which wants to preserve the rural character.

A conservation subdivision begins with a careful assessment of the land. "Before ever selling to a developer, the landowner walks the land with a preser-

ARBUTUS LAKE: DAVID L. FOX. SKIER: TODD ZAWISTOWSKI.



Lake Ann Pathway

THE WORD ON THE TRAIL

Power TO THE Plow

Last winter a group of Traverse City area locals were peeved when the Michigan Department of Natural Resources announced that, due to budget cuts, parking lots at ungroomed state ski trails would go unplowed. The decision seemed anti-tourism and anti-fitness at a time when we need more of each. The skiers called everyone they could think of, even officials in the governor's office, to no avail. At least one samaritan reacted by plowing the lot at the Lake Ann Pathway trailhead surreptitiously, under cover of darkness (illegal because he had no contract), so skiers could access their beloved trail. With Michigan's budget still bleak, nobody knows if state plowing will resume this winter. But cross-country skiers can be assured that the small group of advocates for plowed ski trail parking lots still will be fighting the good fight.—A.B.



► Outdoors

vation specialist and marks off all the special places that the owner would like to see preserved," Manecke says. Those areas are off limits to development.

The property is then evaluated for home placement, with sites selected that respect the land and provide views for the homeowner. Next, roads and hiking trails are planned. "Roads have homes on one side only, so everybody has a view of open space across the street," he says. And finally the developer draws the lot lines. "It's completely opposite traditional subdivision design," Manecke says.

Conservation subdivisions typically preserve 50 to 70 percent of the land. "Developers say, 'I'll make less money

Conservation subdivisions

typically preserve 50 to 70 percent of the land.

because there will be fewer lots," Manecke says. "But that's not the case." The lot sizes are smaller—but the number is the same, and the value is often higher because of the richness of the parklike setting. "The real estate market has proven, with lots along lakefront and golf courses, that small lots can actually appreciate faster," he says.

A conservation agreement on the undeveloped land assures the homebuyer that the open space will remain open space. One of the biggest hurdles Manecke

Learn more about LandChoices at www.landchoices.org.

hopes his new nonprofit can overcome is traditional zoning that all but mandates cookie-cutter subdivisions and doesn't respect the land's natural features. "We need to convince zoning boards that conservation subdivisions must be the norm, and you need a variance to do anything but this," Manecke says.

For anybody who loves the look of their Northern Michigan community, those are wise words to heed. Just ask the fans of Arbutus Lake. The 462-acre parcel is now for sale on Ebay, listed for \$10.5 million. Just click on "see all land parcels," sort by "Price: highest first," and there it is, right on top—its future open to speculation. **■**

Jeff Smith is editor of *Traverse*.
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