

V • I • S • I • O • N • S

Newsletter of McLean County Regional Planning Commission

Director's Notes

Conservation subdivisions are often discussed within the context of sensible growth because of the social, economic and environmental benefits offered by this increasingly popular type of development. Innovative designs often make efficient use of land and resources while creating a sense of community within a predominantly rural setting, usually within a short commute of a larger urban area. These factors, combined with an abundance of protected open space, can produce a quality of life that is highly desirable and highly marketable.

As a result, more and more attention is being given to this concept. Numerous projects are in various stages of development around the nation, a few of which are described in this feature article. Conservation subdivisions are also described in the McLean County Regional Comprehensive Plan as an effective means of meeting land use objectives.

This article attempts to provide some additional insight into the characteristics and features of conservation subdivisions. It also describes some tools that have been used to aid in their development and notes some general areas where this type of development might be appropriate in McLean County.

We look forward to receiving your questions and comments on this and other topics. Thank you.

PR

CONSERVATION SUBDIVISIONS

Conservation subdivisions are an excellent mechanism for encouraging sensible growth in rural areas. This form of development provides an opportunity for the creation of rural subdivisions which preserve farmland and open space, preserve environmental resources, and maintain the "rural flavor" of the land. This article discusses the need for conservation subdivi-

essary to accommodate rural growth. Secondly, rural growth may have a negative impact on environmental resources such as trees and water. Thirdly, rural subdivisions may create a conflict between residential and farm uses. And fourthly, residential growth and other development often consume unnecessarily large amounts of open space. An additional and very



Figure 1. The Coffee Creek Center project in Chesterton, Indiana is setting aside almost 40% of the development for common open space. Pictured above are some of the improvements being made to increase accessibility to natural areas.

sions, the benefits they bring, and the design details that differentiate a conservation subdivision from a conventional subdivision. It also provides examples of projects underway in the Midwest.

important reason to consider alternatives to conventional rural subdivisions is to preserve the rural feel and historic resources of an area in the face of development pressures.

THE NEED

The need for a different kind of rural subdivision arises for several reasons. First is the concern that rural subdivisions consume more farmland than nec-

HOW CONSERVATION SUBDIVISIONS CAN HELP

A conservation subdivision creates a "win-win-win" situation by utilizing sound design principles to allow for rural growth while addressing the concerns listed

JANUARY 2001 ISSUE

Volume III, Number 3



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Director's Notes1

Feature Article
Conservation Subdivisions1

Updates8

Public Voices Support For Open Space

In 1999 there were approximately 102 open space acquisition ballot initiatives throughout the nation. Of these, 92 were winning referenda resulting in a total of \$1,832,993,000 for open space acquisition by local governments. In Illinois, referenda for new Forest Preserve Districts, open space preservation and the purchase of specific property were approved in Kane County, Will County, Lake County, Glen Ellyn, Homer Township, and Libertyville for a total of approximately \$206,000,000.

Source: 1999 Referenda Results- Voters Invest in Open Space, Land Trust Alliance

above. By doing so, this form of development creates a higher quality home and property for the homebuyer, an economically efficient project for the developer, and a rural growth pattern that helps accomplish community planning goals (i.e., farmland and open space preservation, and environmental and historic resource conservation) for local government and citizens.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

Randall Arendt, a leading proponent of conservation subdivisions, describes three interrelated tools necessary for the successful implementation of this innovative development form. These tools are: 1) an area-wide map of existing development and conservation areas, 2) multi-tiered zoning, and 3) a four step design process

(Randall Arendt, "Creating Open Space Networks". Environment and Development. American Planning Association. May/June, 1996). Each of these is described below.

Areawide Map Of Conservation And Development

This map would identify all of the natural and historical features worthy of preservation in the area being considered for development. These features could include tree cover, significant topographic features, bodies of water, prime farmland, historic structures, or other important resources. It would also identify lands without any such features that are therefore more appropriate for development.

Referencing such a map in zoning regulations would allow a jurisdiction to direct development away from key resources. Existing maps and plans such as the *McLean County Regional Greenways Plan* and *McLean County Regional Comprehensive Plan* (Figure 4) could serve as a foundation for such a map. Additionally, the County's Geographic Information System and Land Evaluation and Site Assessment program are existing tools that could be used to incorporate the map into the development review process (as discussed in a previous VISIONS newsletter devoted to "Site Development Guidelines").

Multi-tiered Zoning

This concept includes three "by-right" options which promote

the development of conservation subdivisions and open space preservation. The first option allows for low-density upscale homes and mini-estates (maximum density of one dwelling unit per 10 acres, with the potential for two accessory dwelling units that may be subject to architectural standards). The second option allows for higher density subdivisions which utilize conservation designs and traditional village layouts. This option requires that half of the buildable land be designated as permanent, undivided open space. Finally, a third option offers density bonuses to developers who wish to set-aside more than half of their land as open space (in addition to the land unsuitable for development which would be left as open space anyway).

Four Step Design Process

The four step design process is as follows:

1) Identify Potential Conservation Areas

These include primary areas, which are unbuildable, and secondary areas (prime farmland, wooded areas, historic areas, and other resources). Specific examples of secondary conservation areas could include an old farmstead set in its context of surrounding fields, appealing views from public roads, stream valleys, farm ponds, and similar features.

2) Locate Housing Sites at an Appropriate Distance From the Conservation Areas

Keeping houses at a respectful distance from conservation areas allows for higher densities to be accommodated while providing everyone with a view of the features that make the site special. For example, homes can be backed up to a wooded area for privacy and to provide them with a view of an open field in the front of the house. Or, houses can be clustered with the views to the rear being preserved.

3) *Align Streets and Trails*

Street alignments are then made to "fit the lay of the land". This means following the natural topography of the site and disturbing the conservation areas as little as possible. Walking and biking paths should connect various parts of the neighborhood and provide access to and through public open spaces. An excellent mechanism for accomplishing this is to establish greenways by buffering streams and providing paths within this greenway. An additional benefit of this mechanism is that the project could take advantage of the natural drainage-ways and streams to assist with stormwater management.

4) *Determine Lot Lines*

Following the first three steps makes the process of determining lot lines relatively simple. With the conservation areas, house sites, and streets and footpaths identified,

the subdivision designer simply needs to draw in the lines, again paying respect to the resources of the site and assuring that houses will provide desirable views and privacy.

NUTS AND BOLTS

Two practical questions that often arise when designing a conservation subdivision are 1) how is wastewater handled in higher density situations? and 2) who owns and manages the open space?

Wastewater

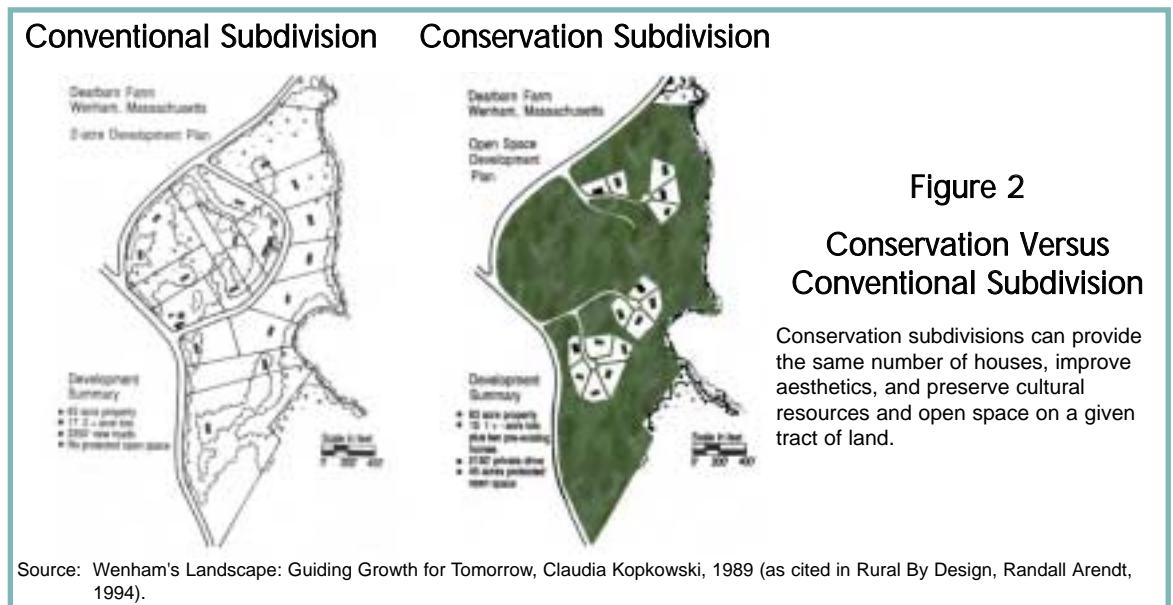
In rural areas, wastewater from homes is managed with private on-site wastewater treatment systems (typically a septic tank with a leachfield). In McLean County, this requires a minimum of a one-half acre lot. Compared to zoning requirements in some areas, one-half acre lots may be considered relatively dense for rural areas. Hence, a well designed conservation subdivision could likely be developed in McLean County under existing density

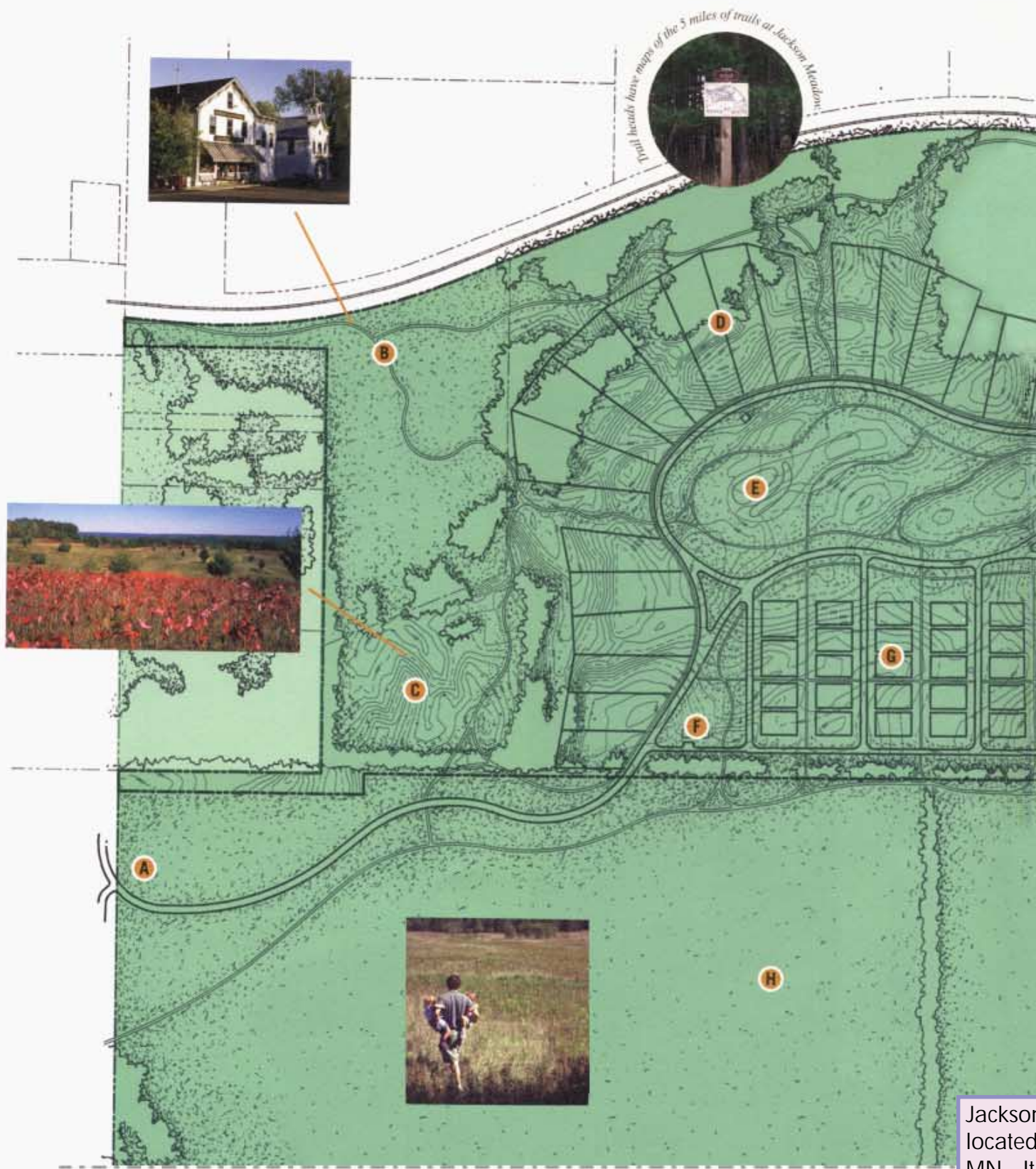
requirements.

On the other hand, smaller lots than currently allowed, mixed with larger lots (one-half acre or larger), would present the opportunity to provide more open space and some more affordable homes on the same amount of land.

This opens up the question as to where to put a leach field for wastewater management. This issue may be addressed by arranging home sites with their individual septic tanks, and using a shared leachfield within common open space. This alternative is more cost-effective and may even be a more effective treatment system by taking advantage of a larger area of more suitable soils within a development for the leachfield (Randall Arendt. "Rural By Design. American Planning Association. 1994).

Long term maintenance of these systems can be assured by having a homeowners' association own the system and requiring membership in the



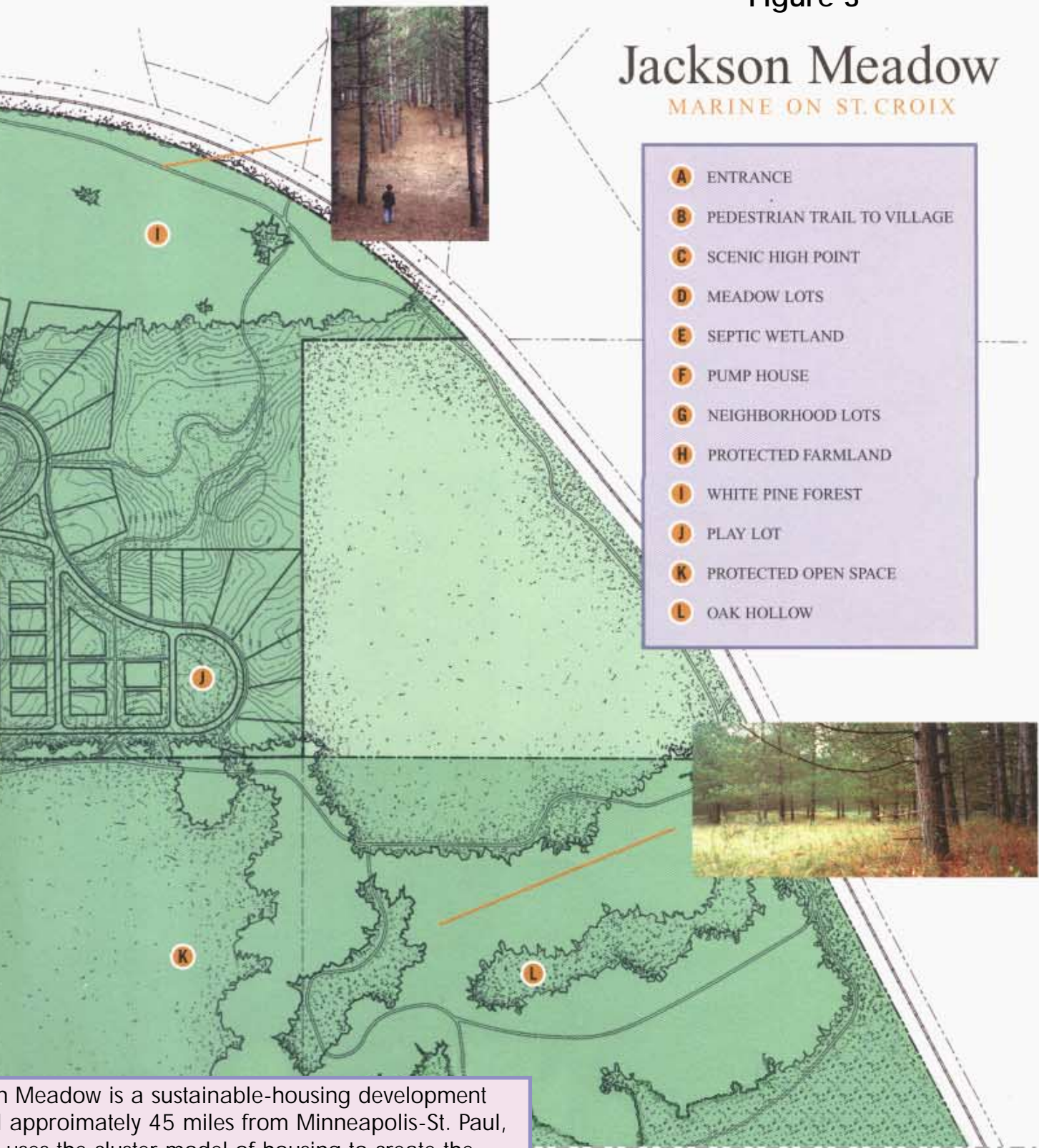


Jackson
located
MN. It
close-k
of oper

Figure 3

Jackson Meadow

MARINE ON ST. CROIX



Jackson Meadow is a sustainable-housing development located approximately 45 miles from Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota. It uses the cluster model of housing to create the intimate feel of a rural village while preserving vast tracts of open space.

Figure 4

**Regional Land Use Plan
Bloomington - Normal Urban Area and Environs**

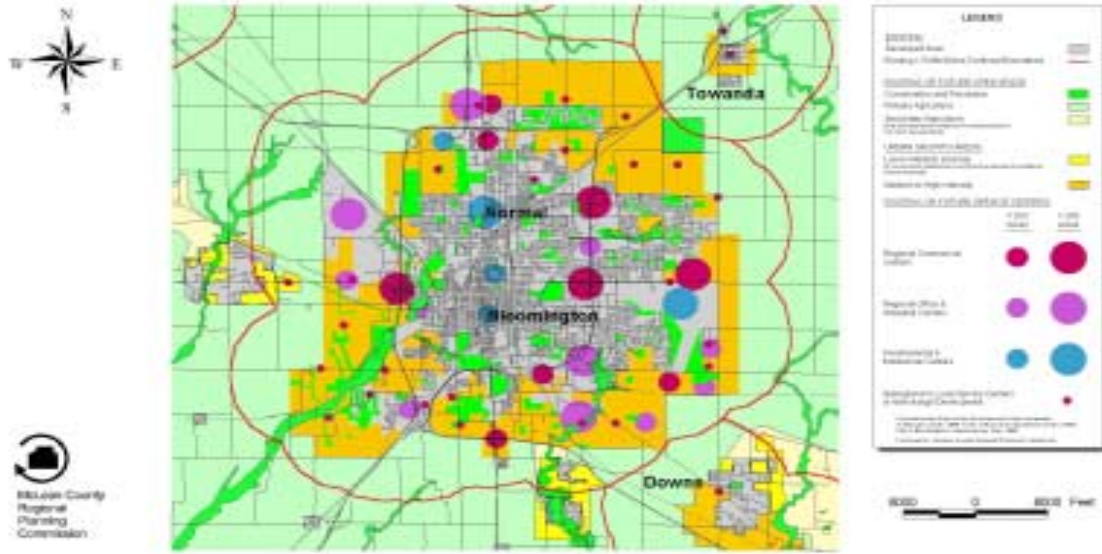


Figure 4. The McLean County Regional Comprehensive Plan, available at www.mcplan.org, identifies three rural growth areas (near Downs, near Crestwicke, and west on IL Rte. 9 shown on the plan in yellow). The Plan recommends conservation subdivisions for these areas and provides rationale for their development.

homeowners' association for all dwelling units connected to the system. This is not unlike the current situation in McLean County where a homeowners' association is ultimately responsible for the effluent discharged from sand filter systems. Furthermore, systems utilizing a larger, common leachfield would have a greater potential of not being required to use a sand filter system, thereby eliminating any effluent and reducing the liability of the homeowners association.

Open Space

Various methods have been used to manage the common open spaces in conservation subdivisions. These include local government ownership, homeowner association ownership of land, or ownership of the land by a local land trust. Government ownership is not likely for most developments, as

limited resources do not allow county government to take responsibility for open space in subdivisions throughout McLean County. This could be feasible, however, when development is proposed in an area which may be considered strategic to the County's park and recreation system. This could include a regional greenway, bikeway, or other open space that is identified in the *McLean County Regional Greenways Plan* or *McLean County Regional Comprehensive Plan*. Similarly, ownership of open space by a land trust would be most feasible if a development were proposed in an area considered strategic by the organization.

Homeowner association ownership and management is the most likely mechanism for common ownership in a conservation subdivision. This method is currently used in other areas and may be implemented in

contract for the site's management.

Two cardinal rules for successful homeowners' association management are automatic membership by all property owners and legal authority to place a lien on the property of any member who fails to pay his or her dues (Randall Arendt. "Rural By Design. American Planning Association. 1994). If common open space and facilities (trails, playing fields, ponds) are kept relatively simple, then dues can be kept relatively low. Echo Hill in Amherst, Massachusetts offers facilities such as woodland trails, a two-acre grassy common, a pond with a float or raft, two tennis courts, and a baseball diamond and backstop. The annual dues rose from \$20 to only \$75 per family between 1969 and 1993. Dues are also used to cover the association's insurance policy. While liability is

various fashions. The homeowners' association may purchase the land and rent it to a farmer for pasture or other less intensive forms of agriculture. The association could also form a permanent deed on the land which would require it to stay permanently in agriculture. Another option would be for the association to develop low intensity recreational opportunities and form a

another concern, gross negligence needs to be proven for insurance claims to be paid. For example, hiking accidents are not a liability concern, as trails are not expected to be perfectly flat (Randall Arendt. "Rural By Design. American Planning Association. 1994).

Although there is a variety of details that would need to be addressed, the many benefits offered by this innovative form of development merit the cooperative effort that would be required of local government, developers, property owners and the community. The following examples demonstrate that these projects can be successfully implemented.

Prairie Crossing

Prairie Crossing is a conservation subdivision near Grayslake, Illinois. The guiding principles of the development are environmental protection and enhancement, a healthy lifestyle, a sense of place and community, economic and racial diversity, convenient and efficient transportation, energy conservation, lifelong learning and education, aesthetic design and high quality construction, and economic viability. Amenities include a charter school, a community garden, a farmer's market, a stable, and a historic barn that was converted into a



Figure 5. A New Home At Prairie Crossing
The houses at Prairie Crossing, a conservation subdivision near Grayslake, Illinois were inspired by the 19th-century farmhouses of the Liberty Prairie Reserve, of which Prairie Crossing is part.
Source: www.prairiecrossing.com

community center that includes spaces for receptions, meetings, and an exercise facility. Over a dozen homestyles are offered that range in size from 1,140 square feet to 3,428 square feet, with 2 to 5 bedrooms, and in price from \$269,900 to \$427,900 (See Figure 5.). More information and photographs of Prairie Crossing are available at www.prairiecrossing.com.

Jackson Meadow

"The Jackson Meadow site is a 145-acre parcel of high ground in open meadows and wooded hills overlooking the St. Croix River Valley within the Village of Marine on St. Croix, Minnesota. Jackson Meadow implements a cluster-housing model, which allows for the preservation of over 70 percent of the site as open space. (See Figure 3.). In its architecture and landscape

architecture the community design expresses simplicity. Housing and street patterns are derived from existing models in Marine, and the development is organized topographically with neighborhoods oriented toward a central green.

In lieu of typical suburban streets, each neighborhood block shares a pedestrian way

located between the fronts of houses. By recognizing that the shortest distance is the footpath, the plan connects Jackson to Marine by walkways, and a loop road links a series of neighborhoods and pedestrian corridors around a central green. Each pedestrian way connects directly to over five miles of walking and cross-country skiing trails. From these trails, residents of Jackson Meadow are within a ten-minute walk to the local elementary school and Marine's downtown village center. This new neighborhood encapsulates the importance of walking, sustainability and diversity, and designates the best land as open space for community interaction and recreation" (source: www.jacksonmeadow.com).

Coffee Creek Center

Coffee Creek Center is a 640 acre plan near Chesterton, Indiana. When built out, it will actually be a complete "new town", with a variety of traditional style homes, a neighborhood center, school, conference center and hotel. It is noteworthy to mention here because about 40 percent of the total site is set aside for native greenbelt restoration. This preserve will be available to all residents and the general public and will play a key role in handling the stormwater generated from the site, reducing costs for stormwater management infrastructure (source: www.coffeecreekcenter.com). ♦

This publication presents information on planning and development issues that impact the quality of life in the Community of McLean County. We can be reached by mail at 211 West Jefferson Street, Bloomington, IL 61701, by phone at (309) 828-4331, by fax at (309) 827-4773, or by e-mail at visions@mcplan.org.

Commissioners

Richard Buchanan, Chairman
Airport Authority

Sharon A. McGinnis, Vice Chair
Town of Normal

William J. Bartley
Town of Normal

Don Fernandes
City of Bloomington

Scott King
Water Reclamation District

James Pearson
City of Bloomington

Richard Percy
Unit School District #5

Jim Rutherford
County of McLean

Janet Smith
School District #87

Sue Strang
McLean County

Executive Committee

Richard Buchanan
Chairman

Sharon A. McGinnis
Vice Chair

Tom Hamilton
City Manager, City of Bloomington

Mark Peterson
City Manager, Town of Normal

John Zeunik
County Administrator, County of McLean

Staff

Paul Russell, AICP
Executive Director

Mark Dravillas
Community Planner

Lydia Reynolds
Transportation Planner

Jason Grootens
GIS Coordinator

Troy Olson
GIS Specialist

Mark Wasakoski
Office Manager

UPDATES

Upcoming Conference

Tree preservation is a key component of the conservation subdivisions described in the feature article. An upcoming national conference, "Building With Trees" offers a great opportunity for developers, land owners, landscape architects, planners, contractors, government officials, and others to learn how to save trees during construction and land development. The conference is sponsored by The National Arbor Day Foundation in cooperation with the National Association of Home Builders and the American Planning Association. This conference,

builds on the "Building With Trees" seminars held regularly throughout the country. Interested persons can obtain a copy of the conference brochure from the McLean County Regional Planning Commission at (309) 828-4331 or learn more online at www.Arborday.org/Programs/bwtNatlConfBrochure.html.

Past VISIONS on Web Site

Past issues of the VISIONS Newsletter are available on the Commission's web site. They are in PDF format and are viewable by any computer with the Acrobat Reader program, free from Adobe. Visit www.mcplan.org for more information.

VISIONS

McLean County Regional Planning Commission
211 W. Jefferson Street
Bloomington, IL 61701

Route to:

- ✓ _____
- ✓ _____
- ✓ _____
- ✓ _____