

Conservation Development Design

The Walworth County Board of Supervisors approved amendments to the county zoning and subdivision ordinances dealing with conservation development design on June 13, 2004. The purpose of the amendments is to facilitate the use of conservation development design for residential developments with five or more dwelling units meeting the definition of a subdivision. Conservation development design allows for an adjustment in the location of residential dwelling units on a parcel of land so long as the total number of dwelling units does not exceed the number of units otherwise permitted in the zoning district (unless a density bonus is granted for meeting certain community goals such as enhanced resource preservation). In a conservation development, dwelling units are grouped on only a portion of the project site. The balance of the site is preserved as open space. Conservation developments are an alternative approach to the conventional lot-by-lot division of land in rural areas, which spreads development evenly throughout a parcel with little regard to impacts on the natural features of the area. Conservation development design enables a developer to concentrate units on the most buildable portions of a site thereby preserving the natural drainage systems, environmentally sensitive areas and rural character, while at the same time realizing savings in development costs for roads, site grading and utilities.

The roots of this effort go back to the last update of the County Land Use Plan, which was adopted in April of 2001. One of the major recommendations of the plan was to pursue the use of conservation development design in order to preserve open space and rural character in Walworth County. In addition to the current County Land Use Plan, the new State of Wisconsin Comprehensive Planning Law (Smart Growth) strongly recommends the use of conservation development design.

On November 6, 2001, a workshop was sponsored by a variety of public and private organizations. The purpose of the Growing Greener Workshop was to present the concept of conservation development design to the community and to determine if there was community support to proceed. Presentations were made by Randall Arndt who is a nationally known expert on conservation development design and Susan Greenfield Town of Caledonia Chairperson who at the time was working on a conservation development design ordinance for their community. The approximately 90 workshop participants indicated strong support for the pursuit of conservation development design in Walworth County.

The County hired Randall Arndt to make recommended changes to the County Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances to facilitate the use of conservation development design in Walworth County.

A series of 7 community workshop meetings were held, beginning in March of 2003, to discuss the concept of conservation development design and to review the recommendations from Randall Arndt on changes to the zoning and

subdivision ordinances. In addition, the State model ordinance and the SEWRPC model ordinance were also used in the workshop reviews.

The County used the services of Andy Yench of UW Extension to act as a meeting facilitator. General consensus of the workshop group was sought on a variety of important decision points with the idea that if agreement could not be reached we would agree to disagree.

In the end, the workshops produced a hybrid proposal combining elements of the Arendt recommendations, the State guide the SEWRPC guide book, input from workshop participants and direction given by the County Land Conservation Committee and Zoning Agency.

Two public hearings were held and additional modifications to the proposed ordinance amendments were made by the County Zoning Agency. The important elements of the proposed ordinance amendments are as follows:

- ❖ Establishes a step-by-step design and review process which brings together at an early stage the parties involved in the development project, the developer, the land owner, project engineer, landscape architect, Town and County officials. The purpose of this meeting is to review a sketch plan and identify potential problems and opportunities. In the end the additional time spent early in the process should save time and provide a more certain outcome in conditional use and plat review process.
- ❖ Creates standards for conservation development design that allow for more flexibility for lot size requirements. Sets minimum shoreland area lot and width requirements to prevent over clustering in shoreland areas. Sets open space requirements, establishes a prioritized list of resources to be preserved in the open space and sets forth long term maintenance requirements.
- ❖ Makes use of conservation subdivision design voluntary rather than mandatory, with the understanding that towns may chose to be more restrictive on this issue through their town subdivision ordinances.
- ❖ Creates density bonus incentives to encourage the use of conservation development design if certain community goals such as enhanced resource preservation are met.

We would like to thank the many people who contributed to this effort. Through this process, we have achieved an increase in public awareness that has resulted in better site design work. With the passage of the proposed ordinance amendments we can continue to improve the way we balance growth with resource preservation in order to provide for a better community in which to live, work and recreate.