FITTING INTO THE LANDSCAPE

Rural development should fit into its natural surroundings, rather than be superimposed as a dominant element in the countryside.

Why Fit In?

We should expect to enjoy and appreciate our environment, even after development occurs. This is possible if we identify and maintain the essential open space system of each location. Conservation subdivisions with smaller average lot sizes will preserve the important natural characteristics of the site and forever provide residents proximity to a rural setting. The ability to require conservation subdivisions is allowed by New York State Town Law, Section 281.

A rural farm house sheltered in the treeline stands in contrast to the new house lots now dividing up the former fields.

Ideally, most new construction will be encouraged in and around centers or in traditional hamlet-scale groupings, but low density development will still continue in rural areas. Local planning boards can insure that developers blend new buildings into the landscape by requiring that they **identify the open space system PRIOR to submitting any plan for subdivision.** Some sites will be more complicated than others, but identifying the open space system is the necessary first step for "fitting in." Once site characteristics are fully understood, then suitable areas for development are delineated. Within these areas, house lots and roads are located. Only as a LAST STEP are the lot lines drawn in.

Rural Development Guidelines

- **Minimize the clearing of vegetation and preserve important natural features.**
- **Retain stone walls, hedgerows, and other rural landscape elements.**
- **Place buildings and access roads in treelines, on mildly sloping ground, or along the edges of fields; avoid construction in open fields or on ridgelines.**
- **Locate structures and septic systems more than 100 feet from streams or ponds to protect water quality.**
- **Re-use farm roads or country lanes whenever possible, rather than constructing new wide roads.**
- **Maintain or enhance scenic views. Protecting the character of the landscape also protects the property's most valuable assets.**

Open Space System Components

- Agricultural Lands
- Wetlands and Floodplains
- Steep Slopes
- Mature Tree Stands
- Views from the Road
- Aquifer Recharge Areas
- Significant Plant and Wildlife Habitats
- Cultural Features, such as stone walls, barns, and historic buildings

"The ultimate goal is the creation of an interconnected network of protected open space weaving through each community."

Randall Arendt

How to Create Conservation Subdivisions

Step 1

Require a map of the open space system for the parcel and surrounding area.

Step 2

Conventional sketch layout determines maximum lot count under existing three-acre zoning.

Step 3

The same number of houses can fit in to the landscape while preserving 80 percent of the open space.

Locate Development Pocket

A sketch analysis of the area provides all the basic information to calculate how a development can fit into the landscape - what land should be protected and potential development pockets.

Typical Superimposed Subdivision

- Productive farmland lost forever.
- Pleasant view from road eradicated.
- Stream corridor cut off by backyards.
- Large lots divide up and dominate the landscape.
- Individual road for each subdivision.
- Costly road and bridge construction.
- No chance for residents to enjoy special site features.

Conservation Subdivision

- Large farm field protected.
- Rural view from road retained.
- Trail system allows access to stream.
- Smaller, but substantial individual lot sizes with central green.
- Potential connection to adjacent parcel.
- Less expensive construction costs.
- Residents have views of open field and direct access to woods.

Maintaining Conservation Areas

There are three primary methods to secure the open space system:

1. dedicate for public park land;
2. create a conservation easement and maintain open space through a Homeowners' Association or agreement with a conservation organization; or
3. develop easements for certain community rights on private property, such as trails.

The second and third options will be used most frequently. Open space subdivisions are only possible when local planning boards believe enough in the conservation subdivision process in order to insist on making these techniques work.

Common Uses for Protected Open Space System

- Agriculture
- Community Gardens
- Forest Management
- Trails
- Visual or Sound Barriers
- Common Septic Fields
- Pastures or Paddocks
- Meadows
- Recreational Fields
- View Protection
- Wildlife Habitat

Sources:
Randall G. Arendt, *Conservation Design for Subdivisions: A Practical Guide to Creating Open Space Networks*, 1996
Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development, *Rural Development Guidelines*, New York Planning Federation, 1994