



Daily Local News

Lightening 'the footprint of development' for land

By Anne Pickering

From West Vincent to London Grove, townships with significant natural resources that haven't fallen under the developers' bulldozer yet are recognizing an important zoning tool to help preserve greenways and open space.

"It's a tool that lightens the footprint of development," said Ann Hutchinson, senior director of municipal conservation services at Natural Lands Trust. The program known as Growing Greener Conservation by Design, is a way for townships to accommodate development and not lose all of the land's natural resources.

"The director of the Home Builders Association of Bucks and Montgomery counties once told me that 85 percent of all new development is on greenfields," said Hutchinson.

In a typical land subdivision plan, nearly all the land is cleared and only trees on steep slopes or wetlands are spared. The parcel is divided into lots with typical residential zoning, such as two-acre zoning one house on two acres, or one-acre zoning with one house on one acre.

In townships that have adopted Natural Lands Trust's Growing Greener conservation ordinance, the process is a little different. The developer does not lose density. He can still build the same number of homes that he could have built in a township without the conservation ordinance but the houses are clustered closer together to maximize open space.

West Vincent is one of six townships in Chester County that has adopted the trust's conservation ordinance. The Brandywine Conservancy also has an open space and natural resource conservation ordinance as does other land trusts.

West Vincent adopted NLT's ordinance in 1998 and the township has preserved 928 acres just through the zoning process, said Township Manager Jim Wendelgass.

A new Hankin development called Weatherstone on Route 401 was built under the ordinance, which is a by-right plan. Weatherstone will have 273 single-family and townhouse units on the 300-acre parcel. But instead of the homes being spread out in one-acre parcels on the 300 acres, they are confined to about 35 percent, or 105 acres, of the development. Under permanent easement is 195 acres, or 65 percent, which includes two farms and forested wetlands.

Eugene Pasymowski lives in one of the homes with his wife, Catherine. They moved to Weatherstone four years ago from Bala Cynwyd. According to a sales brochure, houses in the development start at about \$600,000. The open space associated with the development was a big selling point to the couple. "We have a view of the wetlands and the farm," said Catherine Pasymowski in an interview Thursday. Their home is on a quarter-acre lot instead of a lot that would be just under one acre under traditional zoning.

"At our stage in life, I don't want to maintain one acre," said Eugene Pasymowski. "We don't need all this space and it will remain open space forever. I see it as an increase in the value of my home."

Wendelgass said most developers like the conservation ordinance because there are fewer roads, less infrastructure, and less grading and laying of sewer lines.

Weatherstone is the largest subdivision built through NLT's conservation ordinance in Chester County in terms of the number of homes and the size of the parcel.

Another recent development in West Vincent called Woodstone/Addis on Beaver Hill Road is a development of 11 homes on 35 acres with 19 acres including a working farm permanently protected as open space.

The homes which range in the \$1 million category

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are on half-acre lots. Two homes are on flag lots, which some townships discourage because it means that the driveways will have to be shared. But in West Vincent, flag lots are allowed if the proposed subdivision meets certain design criteria.

The process of building in a township that has adopted a conservation ordinance for its residential development differs considerably from townships that don't have a conservation ordinance.

A developer in London Grove, for instance, will have to have a natural resource plan before approaching the township with a subdivision plan. "They come in with a natural resource plan and then we schedule a site walk," said Steve Brown, township manager.

On the site walk, the township will be represented by the township manager, someone from the planning commission, township engineer, a person from the open space committee and the parks committee and someone from Natural Lands Trust.

The developers will bring their engineer, traffic engineer and landscape architect.

The site analysis is a four-step process, according to their subdivision code. The first step is deciding what will be preserved as open space. The second step is positioning the houses, and the third step is deciding where the streets and trails will go. The fourth step is drawing the lot lines.

The key features are the natural resources, such as wooded areas, streams and riparian buffers, that have to be protected. The township already has a natural resource inventory map for the whole township. The goal is to develop the parcel in such a way as to maintain the existing natural resources and provide natural greenways from one subdivision to another.

The houses are clustered on small lots with permanently protected open space all around, including a network of trails that lead to greenways in other subdivisions.

It's important to have the open space managed by the homeowners' association or be dedicated to the township, said Brown.

In the Stone Croft Preserve on South Guernsey Drive in London Grove, a tributary of the Middle Branch of White Clay Creek flows through a wetland. The riparian buffer has been planted with many trees as part of the open space management plan that the township approved during the land development process. If this were a traditional development with the stream flowing through the backyards of people's homes, said Brown, there would be no way to prevent the individual homeowners from taking out the trees.

The developer of the nearby Lamborn Hunt subdivision has also donated 85 acres to the township for use as a park. State-wide Natural Lands Trust has written 27 conservation by design ordinances for municipalities.

Last year, in a survey of the 27 townships state-wide, 2,022 acres were preserved or on average 62 percent of each development. In Chester County London Grove, West Vincent, Wallace, North Coventry and Newlin have all adopted the conservation ordinance. Many townships write a comprehensive plan that says they want to preserve natural resources, said Hutchinson, but when you look at their zoning ordinance, there is no regulatory means to do that. Townships even with open space plans and money set aside, can't afford to purchase all the open space. With the conservation ordinance, land can be preserved any time development occurs.

To contact staff writer Anne Pickering, send an e-mail to apickering@dailylocal.com