Not just for the wealthy

Conservation Design doesn’t have to be high priced. The Canterbury Development in Bucks County features modest homes affordable to young families. Half of the homes on the tree-lined street back up to the woodland preserve and the other half onto farmland. A 500-foot buffer shields the neighborhood from the dust and noise of the working farm.

Growing Greener

Pennsylvania’s Land Trusts
Conserving our Commonwealth

Produced by the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association working in partnership with Pennsylvania’s land trusts with financial support from the William Penn Foundation, an anonymous donor and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Bureau of Recreation and Conservation Growing Greener Program

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hen Denise and Greg Bayley sit in their backyard, they are surrounded with quiet and a 50-acre apple orchard. The view from their lawn chairs is row upon row of gnarly trees set into gentle rolling hills.

“You can breathe here,” Denise says. “We both love it because of the open space.”

The Bayleys do not own an estate. Nor do they own an apple orchard. They are a typical couple, living in an not-so-typical suburb.

“I have half an acre, here,” said Greg. “I feel like we live on fifty acres.”

As concerns about open space increase, developments similar to the Bayley’s reflect a growing trend. They live in the Ponds at Woodward—a development that actually has a pond and woods—a good example of Conservation Design.

John Snook, a senior advisor with the Brandywine Conservancy’s Environmental Management Center—a charitable land trust—helped plan the development.

“Southeastern Pennsylvania needed other tools besides the traditional zoning and land acquisition approaches. We are losing land too quickly,” said Snook. “Development is going to happen. The question is how.”

Conservation Design

Conservation Design incorporates conservation considerations into the development process and municipal ordinances to create great places to live like the Ponds at Woodward.

This example illustrates the design choices communities have. The Conservation Design protects 32 of the development’s 50 acres as permanent open space. It provides great views and creates a buffer between the development and the farm. The Conservation Design also allows the developer to build an extra 25 houses, which would have been impossible with conventional design.

Most municipalities have a zoning ordinance that allows the top design but makes impossible the bottom design. They can change this by adopting Conservation Design or other open space design codes.

Limited Development

Another approach to coupling conservation and development is called limited development. Conservation Design achieves conservation while allowing the developer to build every house permitted by zoning. But with limited development, the landowner voluntarily reduces the number of houses and consents to a price (per lot) which makes the reclaimed land valuable for preserving open space.

Several Pennsylvania land trusts do limited development work. In two recent cases, Heritage Conservancy partnered with Upper Makefield Township to acquire land. In each case, the Conservancy conveyed a carefully considered portion of the property to a developer, Zaveta Construction. Jeffrey L. Marshall, Vice President of Resource Protection said, “Everyone was thrilled that the majority of the land was saved and many great principles guided the development.”

Richard Zaveta of Zaveta Construction and numerous friends to this partnership. His project received an expedited review because the conservation values being preserved. He benefited from guiding in site imperfections and securing greater value in lots that are surrounded by open space.

Pennsylvania’s Land Trusts
Melding Conservation and Development

With Denise and Greg Bayley in their backyard, they are surrounded with quiet and a 50-acre apple orchard. The view from their lawn chairs is rows upon rows of gently massed into gentle rolling hills.

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Conservation Design

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Simply put, Conservation Design arrangements the development of a parcel so that half or more of the buildable land is permanently set aside in open space. The same number of homes can be built—just on smaller lots—or landsowners and developers are not financially penalized.

Four decades ago, developers identified the natural and cultural features of the land to be developed. The most significant of these features are set aside for conservation—as are lands to be developed across town like many other parcels and lands. Housing is then carefully planned to take advantage of good views and the open space.

A village arrangement of homes is set on the street between the ponds and the orchard. Back yards face the ponds from windows open to the orchard. Further up the trail, single-family homes dot a roadside until the last one—the Bayleys’—comes into view.

Sensible development

For obvious reasons, you never see names like these on new subdivisions. But wouldn’t it be nice if rather than setting back new developments after the landscape has been imploded, they could be thoughtfully named after the landscape they preserved?

Conservation Design presents the opportunity to develop while retaining substantial portions of the landscape in its historical conditions.

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Natural Land Trust (NLT) planning professionals—Randall Arendt, Ann Hutchinson, and Monica Drewniany—lead the tour. One of the first points they make is that the Woodward design is unusual.

“With hard to build the kind of development, if the right codes are not in place,” Arendt told the crowd, “it’s tough to make. It’s a very topsy-turvy, it’s illegal. Nothing but two-acre lots permitted in the two-acre district and one-acre lots in the one-acre district. No open space and nothing special preserved.”

Letting out a conserva- tion subdivision is similar to designing a golf course development—golf course is never an afterthought. With Conservation Design, you craft development with the woods, farms, or other key land features in mind from the beginning.

Small investment, big payoff

NLT’s Growing Greener program breaks options available to developers and homebuyers by helping municipal officials create better land use ordinances.

Eleven Pennsylvania townships have adopted Growing Greener standards. Three approved preliminary plans using Conservation Design put aside 1,350 acres of open space out of 2,205 total project acres. The townships are saving an average 46% of residential land in a process that once would have consumed all land with housing lots and roads.

Former Wallace Township supervisor and planning com- mission member Alice Felton explained that last township had strong development- design proposals to double their populations.

“We had 26 subdivisions coming at us at the same time. We listened to NLT’s ideas and saw that they had relevance.”

Under the Growing Greener ordinances devised with help from NLT, Wallace has approved 240 acres of developments, with 120 of those acres put aside as open space.

West Vincent Township also uses Conservation Design. “The township was desperately looking for something to mandate reasonable, logical open space other than extra buy from private sales,” said Supervisor Joe Politte. “[NLT professionals] were able to help us. West Vincent is now known for top rate ordinances.”

Similarly, the Bradford County Conservancy has assisted numerous municipalities in developing standards for Conservation Design, often calling it the “Open Space Design/Splits,” resulting in the protection of several thousand acres of open space.

Developers’ perspectives

Developers can be boy, but many find Conservation Design a plus.

“Proper use of the conservation design approach definitely means value,” said developer John Lack of Trilogy Investments, LLC. “Significant resources can be preserved without sacrificing the value of the underlying property asset… [projected] actually increased in value since I first embraced the conservation design approach.”

“We try to promote this type of development,” said Joe Palles of the Hanlin Group, which is building in West Vincent Township. “It’s a new way of thinking. It’s a long-range investment.”

Of the 32 acres in Hanlin’s mixed residential and commercial development at Waterstone, 19 are set aside as permanent open space, including woods, recreation areas and active farmland.

Developer appreciates the role land trusts play in making Conservation Design work.

“The Bradford Conservancy has been extremely effective in conveying and developing plans that balance the needs and typical conflicts between developer and township,” said Robert J. Dreyer, former vice president of Bradford Properties.