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## Subdivisions designed for conservation get a boost

**Will County, others see developments bloom after rules were changed**

By Dennis Sullivan

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One year after moving into a conservation subdivision between Monee and Manhattan, Will County Board member John Anderson's family remains smitten. "We really do love it," Anderson said of the 119-home residential Canterbury Lakes, which allocates 34 percent of its 160 acres for active and passive open space activities.

"You almost have a college-campus feel," Anderson said, noting the presence of "six or seven lakes and gazebos, and park benches everywhere" in the Green Garden Township subdivision, about 1 1/2 miles west of Interstate Highway 57.

With three sons at home, Anderson and his wife, Lora, are particularly pleased with the 4 1/2 -mile paved path that runs behind the homes in Canterbury Lakes. The boys enjoy bicycling on the path, which is at least 7 feet wide and takes advantage of hilly terrain and snakes in and out of nearby woods, he said.

Anderson said the children weren't allowed to leave the driveway of their previous home in a nearby village, "because we lived on Main Street."

But a few years ago, the Andersons and other home-buyers wanting a taste of rural living in a suburban environment in Will County would have been limited to a large-lot subdivision because of a county land-use ordinance strictly limiting the number of homes per acre.

According to the Conservation Foundation's Dan Lobbes, such ordinances are intended to prevent overbuilding, but they can have the side effect of discouraging developers interested in trying new approaches, like treating wetlands, creeks, groves of trees and other ecological aspects as assets, rather than developmental obstacles.

In June, the County Board amended the subdivision ordinance to establish conservation-designed subdivisions as a zoning classification joining two other collar counties -- Lake and McHenry -- that have similar allowances.

The change reflected input from a variety of sources, including conservation-development leader Jim Paul, the Conservation Foundation, and the Will-South Cook

Soil and Water Conservation District.

The new ordinance cuts much of the red tape and expense formerly associated with conservation development. It also rewards developers who establish public trails and conservation easements, preserve historic buildings, and otherwise "significantly enhance, promote or restore natural features" by allowing more homes per acre, overall.

Lobbes, the Conservation Foundation's director of land protection, said developers plan a conservation subdivision by first establishing the locations of existing wetlands, creeks and other ecological values. They then plan residences and roadways around them.

"It's completely backwards from traditional residential development," he said. Usually, planners "try to put in as many houses as they can, then take away the ones they're told they can't have.

"Too often developers will have good ideas and will run up against county and municipal regulations geared toward traditional development," he said. "They'll say, 'To do this, you're going to need a variance.'

"When conservation-minded folks see developers coming in and asking for a variance, they get all upset, even if it's for a good reason."

But the conservation-development approach has gradually emerged in the Chicago area, with the 678-acre Prairie Crossing development in north suburban Grayslake possibly the best-known example.

Lake County encourages conservation development techniques in "appropriate" areas, according to the county's residential development information.

In early 2008, the McHenry County Board established a subdivision classification that encouraged developers to cluster residential lots to allow for more open space. That ordinance specifies a minimum amount of open land and protects native trees.

Will County Board Land Use and Development Committee Chairman Tom Weigel said conservation-design subdivisions offer greater natural resource protection, require fewer streets and utilities, use a natural aquifer-recharge system, and reduce storm-water runoff.

They are, Weigel said, "important to ensure a higher quality of life for our residents."

They also reduce development costs. Clustering homes reduces the amount of materials needed for roads, sewer service and other infrastructure.

That reduction translates into savings on the developer's investment and, ultimately, maintenance.

Will County already sports half a dozen such developments in Green Garden along

Manhattan-Monee Road between Harlem Avenue and 80th Street.

Each required variances and special-use permits.

Most of the subdivisions are the product of Jim Paul's Alps Development Inc. One of Anderson's neighbors in Canterbury Lakes, Paul draws upon the theories of land planners Dwayne Linden and Randall Arendt to preserve open space.

"I know them both as friends in the business and both are passionate about their work," Paul said. "I am too."

Paul said he would submit Canterbury Lakes for an Illinois Environmental Protection Agency landscaping and conservation award this year. The development is particularly significant because it is diagonally intersected by Forked Creek. In 2005 Paul's 95-acre Tuscan Hills won the Illinois EPA award for its allocation of 54 percent of the property to open space and its use of native plants for landscaping.

Lobbes said conservation-design subdivisions have grown increasingly important since a U.S. Supreme Court ruling reduced the Army Corps of Engineers' influence on wetland protection, allowing individual states to craft their own rules.

"We had already lost 90 percent of wetlands from a historic time," Lobbes said. "In Illinois, a good percentage of wetlands has been lost."

He said it is important to involve developers in crafting a conservation-development ordinance.

"If there's no financial viability, [the subdivisions are] not going to get done. We want to make sure they make money so more of them can get done."

A quick look at real estate offerings shows a vacant lot in Canterbury Lakes priced at \$129,000, while a nearby single-family home's asking price is about \$800,000.

"People will pay a premium to live next to managed open space," Lobbes said, adding that a home within 600 feet of open space commands a 19 percent premium -- if it's an aesthetically pleasing natural area.

Lobbes praised Will County's establishment of a special taxing mechanism -- if necessary -- that would ensure adequate funding to maintain the ecological assets.

"It's not enough to set [ecological assets] aside," Lobbes said.

"You have to keep them healthy."

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