For Immediate Release

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Conservation subdivisions offer advantages over "cluster" layouts

Outdated clustering normally includes wetlands and other unbuildable lands in protected open space

MILFORD—The term "clustering" oftentimes causes confusion among homebuyers, planners, officials, developers, and others involved in land development. Many cluster and planned unit development (PUD) subdivision regulations today have not protected much natural land, and have often soured residents and public officials toward the concept of creative subdivision design.

"Conservation subdivisions are far more progressive and effective than simply clustering lots in which the developer's goal of preserving special and otherwise buildable lands is secondary at best," said Kirt Manecke, LandChoices' president and founder. LandChoices is a national non-profit organization promoting conservation subdivision design as a way to conserve land.

"Conservation subdivision design differs from what I call 'clueless clustering' in three ways," said Randall Arendt, the nation's foremost authority on conservation subdivision design and a member of LandChoices' Advisory Group. "First, it sets much higher standards for the quantity and quality of the resulting open space. Whereas cluster ordinances typically require only 25-30 percent open space to be set aside, often including wetlands and other unbuildable lands, conservation subdivisions generally designate at least 35-40 percent of the buildable land (in higher-density sewered districts) and sometimes as much as 65-75 percent of buildable land (in unsewered, lower-density rural districts) as permanent open space. Unlike most cluster provisions, conservation subdivision figures are based only on the acreage that is buildable - high, dry, flood-free, and not steeply sloped - protecting a significant part of the community's important farmland, woodlands and historic features.

Second, municipalities can exercise greater influence on the design of new conservation subdivisions. Rather than leaving the outcome purely to chance, this flexible design approach can be very strongly encouraged or even required where the communities Master Plan or Comprehensive Plan has identified the location of noteworthy resources.

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Third, the protected land is also configured so that it will, wherever practicable, contribute to creating an interconnected network of open space throughout the community, linking resource areas in adjoining subdivisions and/or providing buffers between new development and pre-existing parklands," said Arendt.

According to Arendt, this process works best when guided by a landscape architect or physical planner, collaborating with a civil engineer. He notes that the creative skills of a landscape architect or planner are essential to balance the technical training of engineers whose expertise lies principally in streets and drains.

For land developers, this density-neutral approach can pay huge dividends in reduced costs (site grading streets, utilities), while at the same time offering substantial marketing advantages with the more compact houselots associated with permanent open space commanding higher values and selling more quickly than larger lots with none of those amenities.

For local governments, this approach provides a highly effective way of permanently protecting quality open space at no public cost. For example, Hamburg Township in Livingston County Michigan has preserved more than 2,000 acres in this manner, while in Hanover County Virginia the number is 4,500, and still rising.

Arendt encourages local governments across the country to restructure outdated clustering ordinances in terms of these more advanced conservation design principles. Ordinances setting arbitrary dimensional standards totally miss the point of creative design, which responds to the landscape of each parcel. For example, cluster codes limiting housing groups to a specific predetermined number of homes, each separated from the other by a predetermined distance, should be completely reworded so that the land' s elements govern the number of homes in any given neighborhood grouping.

"Hedgerows and other features often make pre-determined cluster sizes impossible without destroying the site's most valuable natural features. Conservation subdivision layouts move away from cluster-style pods of homes and toward a conservation design style that far more effectively preserves rural character," says Arendt.

Arendt and Manecke feel the time is right for conservation subdivisions as boomers retire and yearn for green space. They are confident that LandChoices' outreach efforts will help citizens understand that conservation subdivisions offer many benefits and differ greatly from simply clustering homes together in a development.

For information on conservation subdivisions visit the LandChoices' website at www.landchoices.org .

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