

From the Ground Up

Rhode Island landscape planner Randall Arendt to speak about practical, proven techniques for community-wide conservation design principles on Prince Edward Island

by MARY MacKAY
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A little bit less can equate into a whole lot more when it comes to creating greener communities from the ground up.



Residents at the Fields of St. Croix development work on their common green space. This subdivision is one of Minnesota's first examples of conservation development and includes ecological restoration in the open space, historic preservation, organic agriculture and innovative storm water and wastewater management.

And one Rhode Island landscape planner is advocating for smaller lot sizes in exchange for a common green space as one of many key elements of conservation development design. "We do the design based upon ... preserving up to half of each property by making the house lots less large and (then) arranging them around open space such as park (which is the sum of all that jointly saved land)," explains Randall Arendt, who is also Senior Conservation Advisor for the Natural Lands Trust in Media, PA, and a Fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute.

"(When) you aggregate all those parts ... that are saved by downsizing each lot just a little bit and you come up with a substantial result. Everyone will have their own yard, it will just be that the yards will be less large so there can be a larger (communal) open space that is usable for games, for agriculture, for habitat, for trails (and is protected in perpetuity) ...

"The key is to design the open space first. If the open space is designed at the end of the process it becomes a leftover. It doesn't become a special space at all."

This special element of conservation design will be one of the many topics expounded upon at Arendt's workshop entitled Building Ecology: Economy and the Built Environment in the board room of the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown on March 25, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The workshop, which is organized and sponsored by the Town of Stratford and the P.E.I. Ministry of Environment, Energy and Forestry, will present sound scientific knowledge in professional disciplines such as urban design and planning, transportation planning, infrastructure development and landscape planning.

"The thrust of the talk is how easy this is to do and how much better a lifestyle it produces for the people that live there," Arendt says.

"They can actually live in a park-like setting. They can live in a place where if they choose to they can interact with their neighbours and their kids get a big place to play. You can't really fly a kite very much on a suburban house lot but you can if you've got five acres of former strawberry fields."

And in this instance development doesn't necessarily mean the elimination of farming activity. "Some of these conservation subdivisions will retain an agriculture component. They'll have horses on them with stables or they'll continue with agriculture such as strawberries, blueberries or raspberries, or might include a commercial tree nursery" he says.

"Or they might retain a pristine natural area which is not fragmented with house lots but is an entire woodland habitat with trails running through it."

Arendt's workshop will describe and illustrate practical, proven techniques for community-wide conservation design principles, such as improving the benefits of passive solar of homes by subdivision orientation.

"On most sites — not on every site because some sites are long and skinny and running in the wrong direction — but on most if you run your road (in an) east-west (direction) every house will have a south-facing front or a south-facing back. And they can be designed with lots of windows for passive solar," he says.

Another objective of the workshop is to show how to reduce capital costs for infrastructure of roads, water and sewer service in new subdivisions. "In many (development) properties you can reduce the length of the road which means that the province has less to maintain going forward over the next 100 years. Another way that it saves the province money is that by preserving all this open space privately there's less demand to spend public money on open spaces," Arendt says.

"We're also working with the engineers who have control over the standards and one of the discussion points with them is we're looking to see if we can have streets that are a little bit less wide. That's the trend these days, to peel back some of the excessive standards from previous decades."

Arendt says these conservation design principles fit well with developments of all sizes. To date, he's worked with ones as small as eight houses and as large as 1,300 and is presently in the midst of a development in Stratford that will have about 50 homes.

"The town (of Stratford) really ought to consider having a town-wide green infrastructure map where the open space in each one of these developments would link in and you actually get a network," he says.

"Because then you'd really be powering this with a lot of positive energy. It won't be just one (community's) open space and another open space it would be part of the whole system and Stratford is at a point where they can do that because they're not anywhere near built out."