

# CONSERVATION SUBDIVISIONS

GOOD FOR THE LAND,  
GOOD FOR THE POCKETBOOK

By Steve Wright

**K**athy Dennis loves walking, even in the depth of the harsh Great Lakes winter, from her house to her detached garage.

She loves her subdivision's natural trails, its close-knit diverse community, its bird walks, its acres of preserved dunes, meadows, woods, pastures and ponds.

Dennis grew up a city girl in Milwaukee. Her husband, Karl, grew up on Chicago's very urban South Side and the couple loved vertical city living in a Chicago condominium on Lake Michigan. The odds that the recently retired couple would leave the intensity of the city for a rural development 60 miles from the Windy City would seem long.

But the Dennises live in Tryon Farms, a master-planned Conservation Subdivision that has committed to preserving 120 of its 150 acres as pristine, ecologically diverse rural land. Conservation Subdivisions seek to preserve farmland and open space — instead of leveling, sectioning off, completely bisecting with roads and otherwise converting hills, wetlands, woods and other natural areas into a built-out conventional subdivision.

"It's the little things; you really know your neighbors," Kathy Dennis said of Tryon, located very near Lake Michigan in Michigan City, Indiana. "We have nearly 60 households and we know everyone's name. So many people in condos or conventional subdivisions come home, shut the door and never go out except for work and shopping. Here, you meet your neighbors, you have social gatherings, you use the hiking trails together."

The Dennis family first bought a little 600-square-foot cabin in Tryon as a weekend getaway. After a few years of falling in love with the conserved land and the fabulous architecture that blends contemporary design with structures that are in complete harmony with the natural surroundings, they purchased a 2,000-square-foot permanent home.

"My husband was a very urban person, thought he'd never live in the country. He came out here because of me and fell in love with it," Kathy Dennis said. "We traveled internationally, we could have picked any spot we wanted to in the world, but we retired and settled here because this felt like home."

Tryon Farms is the brainchild of another Chicago couple, Eve Noonan and her husband Ed of Chicago Associates Planners & Architects. They had long-enjoyed a second home on the beach in Michigan City.

When they decided to purchase the nearby Tryon Family farmstead, a picturesque piece of Indiana dairy farmland held by the same family from back to the Civil War, the Noonans focused on preserving more than 70 percent of the land.

They knew the site, with its restored prairie and 150-year-old beech trees, would be attractive as a second home to Chicagoland city dwellers. But with the South Shore passenger rail — one of the nation's oldest interurban lines — just five minutes away, they knew their rural residential development would still feature transit connectivity to the big city.

Our square-foot price, because we build so incredibly well, sells much higher per square foot than conventional or traditional building.



The Dennis family at Tryon Farms

"If we hadn't developed this way, the property would have been all commercial — totally flattened. With a Conservation Subdivision, we were able to preserve a 40-foot dune. Our dream was to build something like this."

Homes in Tryon, clustered in little pockets of land, range in price from the high \$100,000s to the mid \$400,000s. The 120-acre preserve is held by a

nonprofit foundation that uses the old barn and residential farm animals to present educational workshops. The nonprofit guarantees the 120 acres will never be developed and it saves homeowners from paying taxes on what would have been valued as a 120-acre common area.

"We build in stages, starting in front of the parcel and working our way back, organically controlled by the land. This means we don't have big up-front prices and don't have to sell houses quick, quick, quick in order to get out from under the financing," Eve Noonan said of the advantages of Conservation Subdivisions to developers' bottom lines. "We've also discovered our square-foot price, because we build so incredibly well, sells much higher per square foot than conventional or traditional building."

Noonan said the biggest hurdle for a would-be Conservation Subdivision developer is an outdated, conventional set of city or county regulations that stipulate minimum lot sizes, minimum road widths and utility requirements that could prevent the goal of preserving land while clustering houses.

"By doing these clustered settlements, we don't have to do the infrastructure for the whole 170 acres, which saves money," Eve Noonan said. We had to get special permission to build our roads more narrow than code allowed. With narrow roads, drivers slow down, kids feel safe riding bikes and the fire trucks can always turn around using part of the farmland off the paved surface. We also had to fight the city to be allowed to do Constructed Wastewater Wetlands sewage treatment on site, instead of running miles of city sanitary lines."

Suburban Detroit resident Kirt Manacke is so convinced that Conservation Subdivisions are the antidote to America's unwavering consumption of rural land for suburban sprawl, that he created LandChoices. The nonprofit organization strives to inform

stakeholders about land protection options "that are sensible and beneficial for both land developers and landowners."

Manacke asserts that in addition to protecting rural lands for crop production, livestock grazing or just beautiful green space, Conservation Subdivisions have a track record of success for landowners, developers, townships and homebuyers.

"Contrary to popular belief, conservationists and developers make a very profitable team, reducing costs while increasing the desirability and market value of new developments. Few landowners, citizens and planning commissioners realize such options exist," said Manacke, echoing the words of his press release about his on-line clearing house of conservation information.

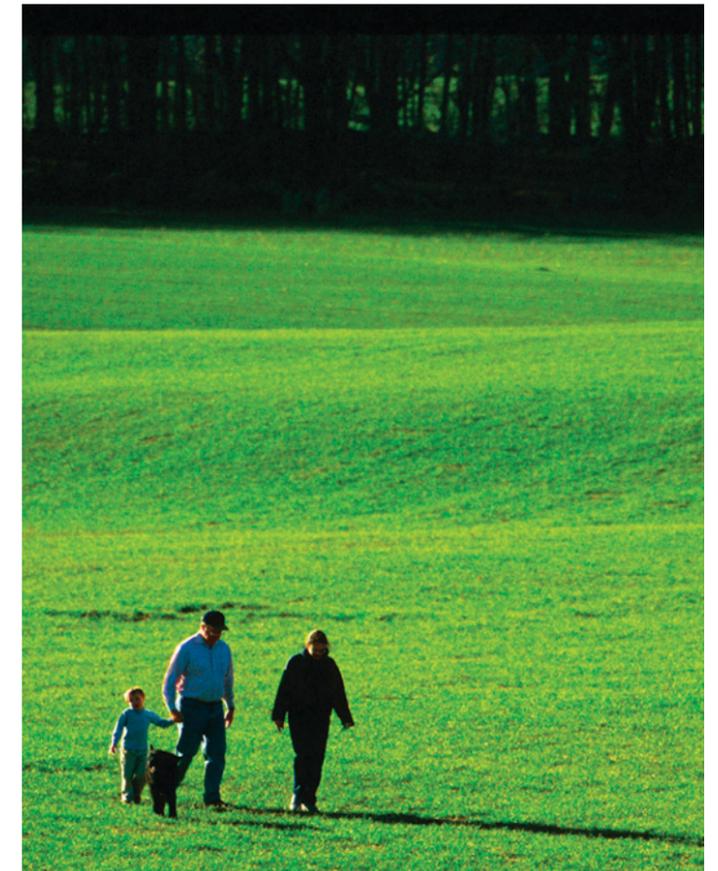
Randall Arendt, a member of LandChoices' Advisory Group, is one of the nation's foremost authorities on Conservation Subdivision design — one might even call him the father of the movement to bring development to a plot of land while perpetually preserving at least half of its rural/agricultural nature.

"One developer in Texas who hired me to redesign his 60-acre subdivision told me that his site grading costs plummeted from \$300,000 to \$50,000 as a result of my re-design," Arendt said via e-mail interview while overseas. "In Tennessee, my re-design saved one developer approximately \$212,000 in street construction costs, while at the same time introducing significantly more quality open space into the layout. Another design is credited by an Indiana developer as having added \$20,000 to \$25,000 of value to each of his 40 lots."

Arendt, a landscape planner, site designer and author of more than 20 smart land use publications, has worked for clients in 21 states — from Florida to Texas to the South and the Midwest, where Conservation Design has become a very popular way of accommodating housing growth while conserving rolling farm land and crucial wetlands.

In North Carolina's prized and growing Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill research triangle area, the town of Cary has earned awards for its controlled growth including Conservation Subdivisions.

"We adopted an ordinance that requires that Conservation Subdivisions be done in the area that touches our watershed," said town of Cary Senior Planner Don Belk. "This involves about 1,500 acres in our western planning jurisdiction where there are very poor soils in a very rural area, but municipal utilities are now available so it also is the hottest development area in the region."



Previously, the 1,500 acres were zoned for minimum one-acre lots. Now, the area is allowed to have up to 2.5 units per acre, but only if housing is clustered and a significant amount of preserved open space is created as part of the development.

"We have a representative of Toll Brothers — one of the biggest homebuilding companies in the nation — who is actually going to the landowners and encouraging them to dedicate the conservation land up front, before they sell," Belk said. "They take advantage of the state's conservation tax credit program for a big tax break, then they get the proceeds from the sale of the remaining developable land."

Many successful developers are converts to Conservation Subdivisions. Waukesha, Wisconsin-based Siepmann Realty Corporation

Conservationists and developers make a very profitable team, reducing costs while increasing the desirability and market value of new developments.



has been creating communities that conserve land for more than 40 of its 62 years in business.

When a visitor clicks on Siepmann's internet homepage, a spinning counter comes to rest on the figure 1,566 — the number of acres of open space preserved in the developer's conservation communities.

Sugar Creek Preserve, in southeastern Wisconsin, is a Conservation Subdivision of 52

frame the lot purchase differently than a regular lot and block subdivision. At Sugar Creek Preserve we tell buyers that they aren't buying one acre lots, they are buying a 176 acre lot, of which they have one acre to build on," said Rob Keefe of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin-based Keefe Real Estate.

However, Conservation Subdivisions do pose challenges. They don't work everywhere. Dense urban areas or regions boxed in by oceans, moun-

visualize how the homes will relate to each other before construction begins. REALTORS® have to be very good at painting a picture of the completed project and selling the lifestyle vision to the prospective buyers."

Financial incentives are always a plus. Tryon developer Eve Noonan said resales are strong in her Michigan City, Indiana Conservation Subdivision; homeowners will benefit by buying a site surrounded by preserved land. Not only will homeowners benefit in the long run, but developers benefit by saving site grading and infrastructure costs. "I think in lots of ways, we have found out financially that this kind of development can be very, very successful," she said. "That is good news not just for everybody's pocket-books but also good news for Mother Nature."

*Wright frequently writes about Smart Growth and sustainable communities. He and his wife live in a restored historic home in the heart of Miami's Little Havana. Contact him at: [stevewright64@yahoo.com](mailto:stevewright64@yahoo.com).*



Sugar Creek Preserve, Wisconsin



## Homeowners will benefit by buying a site surrounded by preserved land.

tains or other extreme boundaries — such as Florida's Everglades — simply do not have the large tracts of land required. And, while Conservation Subdivisions offer prices in the mid-range, rarely are they good sites for affordable housing because they are located far from urban job centers and their amenities. Their relatively low densities compared to the central city densities make it difficult to offer low-cost housing that requires many units on land acquired as cheaply as possible.

Keefe said there are even challenges to luring people that are already in the market for developments that conserve large tracts of land. "Conservation Subdivisions can be difficult to sell in the early stages. Prairie restorations look terrible for the first two years while the grasses are being established," he said. "The construction traffic and excavation work takes away from the peaceful natural setting. Like any new subdivision it's hard to



Architectural renderings depict the town of Cary, North Carolina filling in with development while preserving open space.

### SOME BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION DESIGN *(adapted from the writings of Randall Arendt)*

1. Greater flexibility in lot sizes allows developers to create more compact lots. Conservation Design can be used on lots that are serviced by municipal water/sewer, where lots are typically reduced from 20,000 square feet to 12,000 square feet. Compact lots are a benefit to empty-nesters who wish to minimize their routine outdoor maintenance work (mowing lawns, raking leaves, etc.). It also enables developers to take far greater advantage of special places on the property (such as knolls offering views of ponds, meadows, etc.) by siting a larger number of narrower lots there than would ordinarily be possible.
2. The ability to divide and sell parts of the protected open space as "conservancy lots" enables developers to tap into the higher-end country-property market, boosting profit margin and also adding value to all lots in their vicinity.
3. Reduced site grading costs are another "hidden incentive." This enables large tree preservation, which retains the value that such trees add to the neighborhood.
4. Reduced street costs are sometimes another benefit, via wider street layouts permitting shorter streets.
5. Greater attractiveness, provided by the open space, is another benefit having direct economic value. Conservation lots sell for a higher price compared to house lots without open space, such as those in conventional subdivisions.
6. Faster absorption rates are another economic advantage created when significant amounts of open space are preserved. Conservation lots sell out faster when placed on the market.

### CONSERVATION SUBDIVISIONS INTERNET RESOURCES

- Tryon Farm: [www.tryonfarm.com](http://www.tryonfarm.com)
- LandChoices: [www.landchoices.com](http://www.landchoices.com)
- Randall Arendt: [www.greenerprospects.com](http://www.greenerprospects.com)
- Town of Cary: [www.townofcary.org](http://www.townofcary.org)
- Siepmann Realty: [www.siepmannrealty.com](http://www.siepmannrealty.com)
- Sugar Creek Preserve: [www.sugarcreekpreserve.com](http://www.sugarcreekpreserve.com)
- Keefe Real Estate: [www.keeferealestate.com](http://www.keeferealestate.com)
- Red Wing Land Company: [www.redwingland.com](http://www.redwingland.com)

