

Muddy Boots on the Ground

Conservation Subdivision Design for Sheridan County



Workshop participants' used M&M's to mark homesites during sketch plan development. Mr. Arendt prefers these to other methods because they "melt in your mouth, not in your plans". Some sketch plans suffered density losses due to participants' hunger.

Thursday's weather cooperated right on time for a Conservation Subdivision Design Workshop with renowned landscape planner and site designer Randall Arendt.

The workshop was co-sponsored by the Sheridan Community Land Trust and Sonoran Institute, with help from The Nature Conservancy and The Wyoming Business Council.

Forty-five stakeholders attended the half-day gathering including planners, local elected officials, engineers, landowners, consultants, and individuals interested in exploring innovative growth patterns to protect the open spaces of Sheridan County.

Randall Arendt, who wrote the book (several actually) on Conservation Subdivision Design presented examples of developments across the country that had simultaneously accomplished 3 often mutually exclusive goals: Higher net profits realized by the developer; Improved privacy of homesites while maintaining or increasing homesite density; and permanently conserving over 80% of the total property acreage.

Hearing about tangible examples of successful conservation subdivisions is a powerful aide in educating and helping folks to understand the menu of options that should be available for this type of development. However, nothing can take the place of physically walking a piece of property, so the workshop spent a good portion of the afternoon on a 450 acre tract of land west of Sheridan putting it through the paces of Conservation Subdivision Design.



Workshop participants conduct a site walk of a 450 acre property on a beautiful April day.

The participants took information from the site walk and sketched plans using Mr. Arendt's 4-step design process:

- Identify areas of prime conservation, where development will not occur and then secondary conservation areas where development is possible, but would be discouraged. This leaves the remainder of the property as the “developable” space. Areas of prime and secondary conservation may be high quality arable lands, riparian corridors, steep slopes, ridge lines, critical wildlife habitat, areas of wooded vegetation, and areas where soil may not support a septic system.
- The next step was placing each individual house to take advantage of the natural lay of the land, yielding maximum privacy with maximum views or other amenities, while focusing the development in clusters on the property to maintain the 80% open space threshold.

- Participants then sketched in utilities to each homesite; service roads, private trail networks, water lines, and septic systems.
- The final step was to physically draw the lot lines associated with each new homesite.

While Mr. Arendt is the first to admit that these steps are not rocket science, he also points out that they aren't the typical steps most developers or engineers use when drafting typical subdivision designs, which oftentimes ignore the conservation amenities of a property.

The sketch plans that were developed during the afternoon workshop differed in the placement of homesites and utilities. However, their commonality was that they placed 16 premier homesites and associated utilities on roughly 50 acres, leaving 90% of the overall property (400 acres) in productive agricultural land with perpetual protection in the form of a conservation easement.



Landscape planner Randall Arendt addresses the group during the site walk of the property.

What's Next?

Sheridan County is working to implement several measures contained within the 2008 Comprehensive Plan, which includes developing draft Conservation Subdivision Code to give landowners options for a different style of development on their property. While this may not be of interest to every landowner or developer, it may offer an attractive option to the landowner interested in harvesting some of the value from their land without changing its open space character, agricultural use, or historical family significance.

As the County works to develop draft code language it will be brought back to the public in additional forums and workshops for further comments. The Sheridan Community Land Trust will be sure to keep stakeholders informed of these opportunities to review and offer changes to the code, all in an effort to develop a code that works to conserve and preserve the best of Sheridan County for the benefit of current and future generations.



SCLT Board Member Susanna Meyer explains a sketch plan of her group's conservation subdivision design.