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Conserving Nature in New Home Communities

By Michele Lerner

Communities With Conservation Areas Educate Homeowners on Living Next to Nature

Nature can be messy. An unmown meadow, a forest full of undergrowth or a black bear meandering a little too close to your back yard can cause consternation among you and your neighbors even if you relish the abundance of open space in your community. In communities such as Willowsford in Northern Virginia, [Balsam Mountain Preserve in North Carolina](#) and Serenbe outside Atlanta that do get up close and personal with nature, conservation experts are working closely with residents to manage expectations, are providing education about nature and are maintaining stewardship over the land.

“Buyers in our community understand that connection to nature is important for their well-being,” says Monica Olsen, vice president of marketing and communications for Serenbe, a planned community outside Atlanta, with 1,200 acres, 70 percent of which is conservation land. “Our conservation areas are all natural, they’re not a park. So the maintenance we do is just for the safety of our residents and visitors.”

At **Balsam Mountain Preserve**, a 4,400-acre community in Sylva, North Carolina, about 40 minutes west of Asheville, 75 percent of the land is set aside in a permanent conservation easement. According to Joseph Dellinger, the preserve's chief operating officer, the number one reason people purchase homes there is to live surrounded by nature.

More than 50 percent of Willowsford's 4,000 acres in Loudoun County, Virginia, is dedicated to open space, including a 300-acre sustainable farm, meadows, ponds, streams, wetlands, woods and nature trails.

"Many people buy homes here because they want to raise their kids in a healthy way, with the farm lifestyle and open space," says Iris Gestram, executive director of the Willowsford Conservancy, a nonprofit organization at Willowsford. "But most people are used to seeing open space in a community as a park, so we need to educate them about how we maintain the natural environment."

While Gestram says they get calls from residents asking when a meadow meant to stay in its natural state will be mowed, an equal number of residents call to complain when wildflowers get mowed down adjacent to a road.

"This year especially we've gotten calls from people worried about keeping the wildflowers for migrating butterflies," says Gestram. "We spend a lot of time teaching our residents about caring for the environment and learning to live together with nature."

Planning for Conservation

While it may seem as if leaving nature in its natural state should be simple, years of studies and planning go into developing a conservation community.

"We do wetlands surveys, archaeological surveys, tree surveys and environmental surveys so we can plan to build around the natural landscape," says Derek Didonato, director of engineering for Van Metre Homes, based in Ashburn, Virginia. "We want to preserve open space and trees because they provide views for our residents and because we're environmentally sensitive."

For example, at the Broadlands community in Ashburn, Van Metre Homes designed the community around the Broad Run Stream Valley and created a storm water management system to reduce pollution from development. At Meadowbrook in Leesburg, Virginia, the company added trees to former farmland along with a 250-acre regional pond to retain run-off and reduce pollution.

It's important to establish a long-term conservation plan, says Didonato, so that in 20 years or longer, after the builders are gone, open space is still maintained.

Separation of Management

In many communities, conservation land is managed by a nonprofit organization rather than the homeowner's association.

"It's more complex than people think to manage the conservancy," says Gestram. "We work to keep invasive plants out of the area, take down trees if they threaten properties or trails and actively plant or encourage things to grow. For instance, we do 'repair-planting' along streams to improve water quality."

Serenbe's conservation areas are managed by the Serenbe Institute for Art, Culture and the Environment and **Balsam Mountain Preserve's** are managed by the Balsam Mountain Trust, both nonprofit associations.

"Homeowner's associations are meant to think about the residents and the community and nonprofits focus more on conservation efforts," says Olsen.

Depending on the location, these nonprofits receive funds from grants, donations, program fees and sometimes transfer fees when property is sold.

Educational Resources for Residents

In addition to taking care of the flora and fauna in the conservation easements, an important mission of these nonprofit groups is to educate residents about the nature that surrounds them and why conservation often means leaving meadows and forests in their natural state.

"There's always a balance between wanting to maintain the aesthetic appeal of a site and honor residents' requests while preserving natural elements in a community," says Glenn Forester, vice president of marketing for Van Metre Homes.

At **Balsam Mountain**, staff naturalists do research and teach residents, says Dellinger. "They explain that if residents want us to do 'vista pruning' of trees to improve their views, we need to work with the North American Land Trust to make decisions carefully."

Professors and fish and game experts frequently give talks at **Balsam Mountain** about subjects ranging from natural pollinators to rattlesnakes and bears, Dellinger adds.

“No hunting is allowed here, no guns are allowed on the property and we have lots of deer, turkeys, coyotes, bobcats and black bears,” he says. “Our property owners have embraced the idea that they’re living in the bear’s habitat and are careful with their trash and taking in bird feeders at night.”

Nature centers are common in many of these communities, with programs for children and adults and the opportunity to be part of the community’s tracking of sightings of birds and other wildlife.

At Willowsford, residents learn about things such as ticks and Lyme disease and the types of plants and animals in the area through the community website, newsletters, classes and nature walks, says Gestram.

“Residents can take classes with forestry department members and other experts, and we have a volunteer wildlife monitoring program to track bald eagles, foxes, frogs, raccoons and birds,” she says.

The farm at Willowsford offers more opportunities for volunteer work and education. Serenbe also has a farm, along with forests, meadows, creeks and waterfalls, all of which are the setting for residents to learn about local plants and wildlife.

“An important part of our programs is to teach kids and adults to love and appreciate nature, not to fear it,” says Olsen.

For homeowners in these communities, land dedicated to conservation areas offers an opportunity to preserve a sustainable planet for future generations to appreciate.

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