



FactSheet

Extension

Ohio State University Fact Sheet

Community Development

700 Ackerman Road, Columbus, OH 43202-1578

Cluster Development

CDFS-1270-99

Land Use Series

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Introduction

Throughout the post World War II era, out migration from urban to suburban areas and into the countryside has constituted a significant trend throughout much of the United States. In response to this phenomenon, planners, developers, and elected officials have created a number of tools designed to balance growth with the preservation of community environmental and financial assets. One tool that has received an increasing amount of attention in the 1990s is cluster development. This approach may be termed open-space development, conservation development, hamlet style, farm village, or other unique names coined by proponents and developers.

Regardless of the title used to describe it, cluster development is an important tool community planners should consider as they look to the future. The purpose of this fact sheet is to describe cluster development, its history, potential, and limitations.

What Is a Subdivision?

Most of the residential development that has emerged in the suburban United States since World War II can be described as "checkerboard housing development." Since it is so common, this pattern is also considered to be "conventional development." Residential zoning regulations typically provide standards for the division of large land parcels which require that when a piece of land is divided into smaller parcels, or plots, each must have a uniform road frontage, meet specified street standards, and achieve minimum setbacks from roads or neighboring property owners. These restrictions generally result in equal lot areas with homes placed in the same location on each lot regardless of the parcel's characteristics. The resulting group of homes or vacant lots is typically termed a subdivision. In conventional development subdivisions, all of the land is privately owned by the individual homeowners.

What Is a Cluster Subdivision?

A cluster subdivision generally sites houses on smaller parcels of land, while the additional land that would have been allocated to individual lots is converted to common shared open space for the subdivision residents. Typically, road frontage, lot size, setbacks, and other traditional subdivision regulations are redefined to permit the developer to preserve ecologically sensitive areas, historical sites, or other unique characteristics of the land being subdivided.

Consider the following distinction between a conventional and a cluster subdivision. Imagine that a 100-acre piece of land might be subdivided into 50 two-acre parcels, each with a residential dwelling. Under a cluster design, a developer would plan differently. Imagine that the plan would still call for 50 dwellings, but this time each would be located on, say half-acre parcels, "clustered" together in groups. This would only use 25 acres of land for residences and would leave 75 acres of "open space." Typically, the open space areas are in the midst of the development and are designed around the natural or man-made features of the landscape. In our hypothetical 100-acre parcel, for example, we might have three separate areas of open space averaging 25 acres each. One might be centered around a section of woods, one around a pond or a creek, and one around a meadow.

In a typical cluster subdivision, each homeowner has access to all of the open space areas, which may be permanently preserved by a conservation easement -- a restrictive

covenant forbidding any type of development in perpetuity (see OSU Extension Fact Sheet CDFS 1261-99, *Conservation Easements*). To provide maximum protection for both the resource and the residents, the conservation easement should be assigned to at least two organizations, a homeowners' association, whose membership consists of all the homeowners in the subdivision, and a local government agency or land trust (see OSU Extension Fact Sheet CDFS 1262-99, *Land Trusts*). The conservation easement should specify the types of activity permitted on the open land, i.e., recreation, type of agriculture, woodland protection, or stream buffers. It is ideal, but not essential, for the easement to be placed on the property prior to the development of the subdivision. If that does not occur, the property owners could place an easement on the land at a later time.

What Are the Advantages of a Cluster Subdivision?

Clustering housing in rural areas can maintain the rural character of the area. It can also provide open space for community members and preserve critical land qualities. It may provide a sense of community among residents, particularly if some of the open areas are designed for communal activities. Another advantage is that developers often experience cheaper site development costs involving the construction of roads and water/sewer infrastructure. These reduced costs often offset the costs of restoration or development of amenities such as trails in the open space areas. Other advantages include meeting a market need for low-maintenance housing and greatly reducing the impacts of development on watersheds.

What Are the Disadvantages of a Cluster Subdivision?

In many communities, current zoning and subdivision regulations require conventional building patterns. This forces the developer to educate and convince local zoning boards to approve variances for a cluster subdivision, adding a potential time delay to the project.

The maintenance of open space normally requires the formation of a homeowners' association and the assessment of maintenance fees to each subdivision lot owner to pay for taxes, insurance, and the general upkeep of the land in the open-space areas. This is a cost not typically incurred in a conventional subdivision, since all of the land is privately owned.

The smaller-sized lots often result in close proximity to neighbors' homes and are considered a disincentive to some homeowners. If the lots and housing layouts are designed carefully, each house in the subdivision has a private unobstructed view that overcomes the disadvantage of the small lot size. Unfortunately, some earlier cluster

subdivision models did not provide very much open space, resulting in a negative attitude toward this option in some communities.

What Is the Role of Sewage Disposal in Determining What Types of Residential Development Are Created?

In the past, many zoning regulations that called for large minimum lot sizes (two to five acres, for example) were put into place primarily to allow adequate room for on-site septic systems. This was especially true in rural areas, where central sewers were not available. Advances in technology, however, have given developers the capability of creating small community systems where wastewater is transported and treated in an environmentally safe, economically feasible, and aesthetically pleasing manner.

What Is the Difference Between a Cluster Development and a Planned Unit Development?

Most zoned communities in Ohio have ordinances permitting Planned Unit Developments (PUDs). They often include a mix of residential, commercial, industrial, or other uses, whereas the cluster subdivision normally only includes single family housing. Within the PUD, zoning and subdivision regulations need not be uniform with the community's traditional codes. Planned Unit Developments often include single- and multi-family housing at higher densities than permitted in conventional subdivisions. They can contain many of the amenities of cluster developments, i.e., open space, pedestrian paths, or recreational areas. One major difference between PUDs and cluster development is the amount of open space. Where PUDs usually contain 20% open space or less, most proponents of cluster development recommend a minimum of 40%.

How Does Cluster Development Protect Farmland?

Some proponents of rural cluster development contend that this is a tool that saves farmland. The open space areas that are protected by conservation easements do protect land, but it is not likely that these areas can provide space for a vigorous agricultural industry. They are designed more for the enjoyment of the residents than for use in agriculture. However, these areas can be used as effective buffers to separate residential areas from agricultural enterprises and thus may reduce agricultural nuisances, such as odors and noise. Nevertheless, if communities are serious about preserving farmland itself they need to consider very specific farmland preservation tools such as exclusive agricultural zoning, water and sewer boundaries, and purchase of development rights programs (see OSU Extension Fact Sheets CDFS 1266-99, *Agricultural Zoning*, and

CDFS 1263-98, *Purchase of Development Rights*).

Where Have Cluster Developments Been Built and Have They Been Successful?

Cluster housing developments have been very popular in rural areas in the eastern United States. Surveys have shown that residents generally rate them very highly as places to live, and they have maintained their property values well. In Ohio, the concept has been applied in Wayne, Lake, Geauga, Medina, Summit, and Madison counties. For more information on the cluster subdivision concept, refer to the resources and web sites listed in this fact sheet.

Suggested Reading

Arendt, Randall. 1994. *Designing Open Space Subdivisions: A Practical Step-by-Step Approach*. Natural Lands Trust, Media, Pa.

Conservation Development Resource Manual. 1998. The Countryside Program. Western Reserve Resource Conservation and Development Council, Painesville, Ohio.

Daniels, Tom, and Deborah Bowers. 1997. *Holding Our Ground: Protecting American Farms and Farmland*. Island Press, Washington, D.C.

Kunstler, James Howard. 1994. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*. Touchstone, New York.

American Farmland Trust. 1997. *Saving American Farmland: What Works*. Northampton, Mass.

You Can Read About Cluster Development on the Worldwide Web! Try the Following Addresses:

Cluster Housing Development, by Richard Lasnier:

<http://www.reinet.com/library/general/file3.html>

An Examination of Market Appreciation for Clustered Housing With Permanent Open Space, by Jeff Lacy: <http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~ruralma/LacyMarket.html>

'Open Space' Zoning: What It Is & Why It Works, by Randall Arendt:

<http://www.plannersweb.com/articles/are015.html>

The entire OSU Extension Land-Use Fact Sheet Series is on line at: <http://www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~landuse>

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