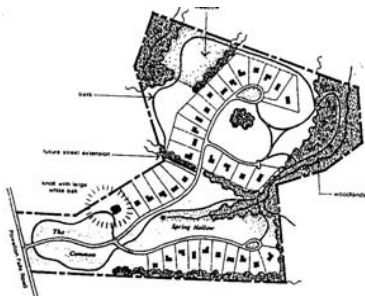


The Northwestern Connecticut
**REGIONAL PLANNING
COLLABORATIVE**

Conservation Designs for Residential Subdivisions



Conservation Design For Subdivision, Randall G. Arendt

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OVERVIEW

Litchfield County towns, like many small towns in Connecticut, seek to minimize the environmental and neighborhood impacts of residential development. Communities are also interested in preserving open spaces that help define the community character.

“Cluster” subdivisions, more appropriately called “conservation” or “open space” subdivisions, can be an effective option for furthering these goals if the regulation is carefully crafted to meet these goals. *This Case Study reviews the options provided in Connecticut General Statutes and the approaches that many Connecticut towns have taken.* We will use the term “conservation subdivision” for consistency.

Conventional subdivision development is based on zoning standards that specify lot sizes, building setbacks, and other dimensional requirements. Often these standards include an open space set aside requirements, typically 10% to 20% percent of the land proposed for development. Subdivision and street design regulations specify such details as street width, stormwater management requirements, and other infrastructure specifications.

Application of these prescriptive standards often results in a less than optimal development pattern. Large expanses of impervious surface threaten water quality. Small pockets of open space do not promote a community’s comprehensive conservation goals. Residential developments sprawl across the landscape consuming far more land than necessary, and requiring greater infrastructure investment.

SUBDIVISION OPTIONS

Fortunately, Connecticut statutes provide an option for alternative development designs, which many towns have adopted.

Statutory Authority

CGS §8-2(a): “... regulations may allow for cluster development as defined in section 8-18.”

[CGS Chapter 124](#)

CGS §8-18: “‘cluster development’ means a building pattern concentrating units on a particular portion of a parcel so that at least one-third of the parcel remains as open space to be used exclusively for recreational, conservation and agricultural purposes except that nothing herein shall prevent any municipality from requiring more than one-third open space in any particular cluster development.”

[CGS Chapter 126](#)

Conservation subdivision design options should not be confused with higher density residential zoning that maintains historic development patterns in village areas. Where additional housing development is to be considered in village areas, regulations can better protect village character by using Village District standards, which may include design guidelines such as building style and materials, landscaping, and other location specific standards.

Conservation Design

- **Benefits:** Providing high quality, desirable housing with lower impact and greater open space benefits.

- **Challenges:** Maintaining design compatibility with existing development; obtaining developer buy-in.

TYPICAL CONSERVATION SUBDIVISION CONCEPTS

1. **Lot Size and Dimensional Standards.** Conservation design standards may allow reduction in minimum lot size. Some standards allow such reduction in proportion to the amount of open space. Coverage and setback standards may also be reduced.
2. **Minimum Open Space.** The statutes provide for a minimum open space provision of 1/3 of the parcel; many towns call for at least 50%.
3. **Open Space Criteria.** Standards should provide specific open space criteria to ensure meaningful open space protection. For conservation subdivisions, the regulations should specify that a fee-in-lieu of open space is not an option, since the primary goal of such regulations is to protect open space.

4. **Design Standards.** Because conservation subdivisions permit smaller lots with reduced setbacks, design standards may be appropriate to ensure a degree of design compatibility among closely arranged structures. Examples are building style, landscaping buffers, and requiring conventional setbacks for lots that abut existing conventional subdivisions.
5. **Street and Stormwater Standards.** Detailed standards that are tailored to smaller lot developments are important to attain the environmental benefits of such designs.
6. **Zoning and Subdivision Regulations.** Conservation subdivision standards must be adopted in a town's zoning regulations, authorizing subdivisions that apply the design concepts. Therefore, subdivision regulations must also be revised to incorporate the zoning standards and any specific planning considerations.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. **Density Bonus.** While the statutes authorize a density bonus for conservation subdivisions, few towns have provided it. The alternative standards facilitate optimal lot layout and reduce infrastructure requirements, providing adequate incentive to developers.
2. **Mandate Conservation Design.** Some towns have reversed the regulatory approach, requiring that subdivisions apply conservation design, and requiring a special permit for a conventional subdivision based on a demonstration of

compelling circumstances. An example of this approach may be seen in Woodstock's Zoning and Subdivision Regulations (see link below).

3. **Affordable or Age Restricted Housing.** Subdivision development for affordable or age restricted housing is, in fact, usually clustered for economic purposes, so it is easy to confuse it with the statutory "cluster" subdivision option. However, the key component of conservation subdivisions is the provision of at least 33% of the parcel as open space. This can increase the development costs. If towns are interested in encouraging affordable or age restricted (senior) housing, they might consider a density bonus for including these types of housing in the conservation subdivision.

RESOURCES

Sample Regulations

- [Woodbury, Connecticut](#)
- [Woodstock, Connecticut](#)
- [Analysis of Open Space Conservation Subdivisions – Town of Newtown](#)

**For More Information or Help Revising
Subdivision Regulations
Contact Collaborative Staff
www.nwetplanning.org**