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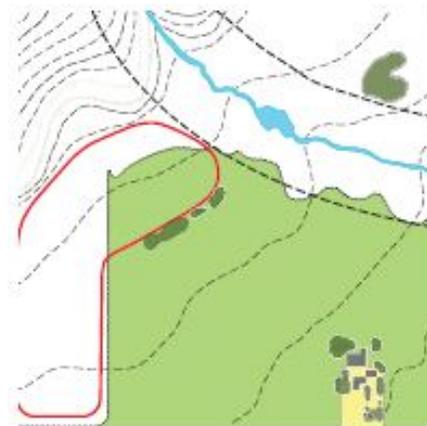
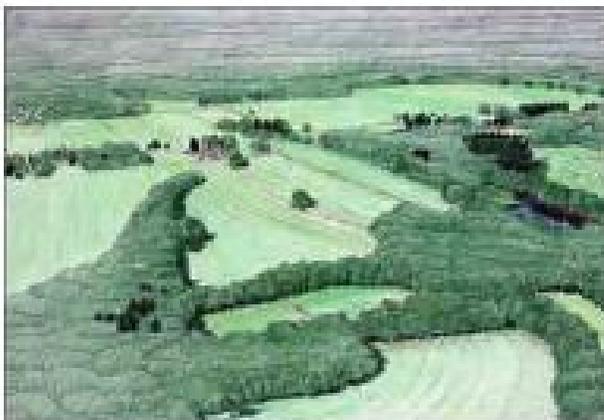
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### Conservation Subdivisions

By: Jennifer MacLeod, AICP, Planner

Subdivisions are an inevitable development element of suburban areas, especially those that are within a commutable distance from a major city. This is true of Orange County, as many residents commute to New York City. Thus, the County encourages the utilization of conservation development to help protect open space, the visual assets, the environment, and agriculture within the County, while allowing for development.

In Orange County, as in other suburban areas, subdivisions are often built on land that was largely farmland, former farmland, or woodland prior to the development. These areas may have had a few houses interspersed through the area, but the land was largely rural, as shown in Image 1 and Map 1.



*Image 1 and Map 1*

Historically, development of land was kept close to existing cities, town centers, and hamlets. However, since automobiles became commonplace in American life, the large-scale subdivision of land expanded to much more rural areas. There has been an increased interest in individuals owning their own homes on their own chunk of land. There has also been an expanded interest for large parcels and big buildings for use by businesses and industries. Such expansion has led to subdivision sprawl. For houses, this presents itself as houses in the middle of large lots. For commercial and industrial uses, the typically large buildings are often surrounded by large seas of pavement. These buildings may consist of single businesses, strip malls, or large indoor malls. Even in the event that a smaller building is constructed, subdivision sprawl is possible.

Sprawling residential, commercial, and industrial development degrades the aesthetic value of an area, negatively impacts the environmental resources within an area, and reduces the viability of agriculture in the area. Visually, sprawling subdivisions disrupt the view of the rural area. This can be seen in Image 2 and Map 2. Environmentally, subdivision sprawl may result in water bodies and wetlands being owned by multiple people, resulting in greater impacts than similar resources being owned by fewer people. Furthermore, subdivision sprawl results in more paved roads, which results in increased stormwater run-off. Also, when



wooded areas are replaced with large yards, stormwater run-off also increases. The increased stormwater run-off results in downstream erosion, flooding, increased water temperatures and reduced oxygen in water bodies, and reduced variety in aquatic life. This sprawl may also impact federally and state endangered and threatened wildlife, especially if the new residents / property owners do not know or are not concerned about how their actions impact such wildlife. Natural wildlife corridors may be disrupted and some animals may not be able to cope with the environmental changes. Animals that have limited mobility may not survive in the area



of the development. Some larger animals may become isolated from their native habitat over time, resulting in more human/animal encounters. Finally, subdivision sprawl impacts agricultural viability as farms are sold and broken up for subdivisions. When such subdivision occurs with a large number of farms within an area, then other farms are impacted when there are not enough farms to support the necessary critical mass to keep agricultural support businesses operating. Such businesses include, but are not limited to, feed stores, tractor sales and repair businesses, farm insurance businesses, etc.

*Image 2 and Map 2*

An alternative to subdivision sprawl is the conservation subdivision. Conservation subdivisions are designed to reduce the overall impacts of a development on the aesthetics, the environment, and the agricultural viability of an area. This alternative can be used in both forested areas and open agricultural areas. Within a conservation subdivision, the same number of units are permitted, but the lots are smaller to allow for open space. This clustering helps retain the rural aesthetics of the site by retaining open space. Since the development uses less space, less impervious surfaces are created (i.e. shorter driveways and shorter roads). Also, for wooded parcels, there will be less tree clearing. Thus, the retained wooded area and reduced impervious area can continue to help minimize stormwater run-off and its related impacts. The clustering of the proposed units also allows farms to remain viable by helping to ensure that the farm has enough land to operate and by helping to ensure that there is a critical mass to ensure the overall agricultural community remains viable. Ideally, the open space will be protected by another party, such as a municipality or a land trust. Image 3 and Map 3 show how a conservation subdivision could appear.



Overall, Orange County promotes the creation of conservation subdivisions. Conservation subdivisions help avoid the negative impacts of sprawling subdivisions, such as disrupted rural views, environmental degradation from stormwater run-off, negative impacts to wildlife, and reduced agricultural viability within the County. Instead, conservation subdivision encourages the clustering of development to protect open space, to protect the rural aesthetics of an area, to minimize stormwater run-off, and to maintain agricultural viability.



*Image 3 and Map 3*