

THE SMART GROWTH

Located in Bethel Township, Pa., Garnet Oaks contains 80 homes on 58 acres and preserves 51 percent of the land as open space.



Courtesy of Randall Arendt and LandChoices

OF RURAL TOWNS

By David Goldberg

The rural township of Rhinebeck, N.Y., had gotten the message on Smart Growth. With development creeping up the Hudson River from New York City, 90 miles away, the township, four years ago, embarked on an effort to plan for the inevitable growth in a way that would prevent it from chewing up the 2,000 acres of unspoiled green buffering the village of Rhinebeck and an unincorporated hamlet on the river.

The concept that emerged would have required most of the expected growth to hug the existing hamlet, allowing for mixed use near the center and about 200 small residential lots. The surrounding land meanwhile, would be down-zoned from one house per five acres to one per 20.

“Philosophically, it may have made sense,” says David Anthone, an architect who at the time was chairman of the hamlet of Rhinecliff. “The only trouble was that it was impractical.”

The most immediate challenges to the plan were political: Residents of the hamlet, part of the nation’s largest historic district and a place that had changed slowly over many generations, reacted in horror that their popula-

tion could double in size “overnight.” Some landowners, meanwhile, complained that their land had been devalued by the down-zoning.

Those complaints are the almost inevitable result of efforts to grow rural towns by adding contiguous development and preserving the surrounding countryside, contends Randall Arendt, a land planner and author known for advocating conservation design. “You run into the problem of ‘wipeouts and windfalls,’” Arendt says. “The owner whose land gets designated for growth nodes gets an instant windfall, while others see the potential to develop their property wiped out.”

For years, these very issues have hampered many rural communities in their efforts to prevent urban sprawl from sucking the vitality of their downtowns, chewing up farmland and undermining the viability of agriculture, marring treasured landscapes and chasing wildlife out of their habitat (and often into town). Despite growing concerns around the country, only one state, Oregon, has taken the dramatic step of imposing a state-wide solution, requiring cities to establish urban growth boundaries and designating farm and forest zones that are off-limits to development.

In recent years, however, a number of highly motivated communities, as well as developers and property owners, around the country have been experimenting with innovative solutions that help towns grow in healthier ways while preserving important lands.

Communities in rural America can be roughly divided into three categories: Those that are holding their own in terms of population and are changing very little; those that are spreading out evenly with zero or negative population growth, hollowing themselves out, in essence; and those that are exploding, in relative terms, because they are within a lengthy commute of a major metro area.

Kent County, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, falls into that last category. Development pressures from the Washington-Baltimore region in the last several years have pushed into the pastoral, scenic area, leading the county to adopt growth-management measures. Those measures were put to the test in 2004 when developer Carl Wright obtained an option on 25 acres adjacent to Kennedyville, an unincorporated village of 150 outside of Chestertown, says Stuart Sirota, a new urbanist master planner hired by the developer to shepherd a development plan into existence.

“The county’s comprehensive plan called for contiguous development outside of Kennedyville, which was in a priority-growth area,” a state designation that makes an area eligible for infrastructure and other subsidies, Sirota recalls. “But that didn’t mean the community was ready for it.”

Sirota was inspired by the opportunity to expand on the historic pattern and character of the village, rather than create a cookie-cutter subdivision. He recognized, however, that the scale of the change — though relatively small by metropolitan standards — would be alarming to residents. He began by holding a charrette, or design workshop, over three days that was open to the collaboration of every one of the community’s 150 residents.

“We did face extreme opposition at first from people who thought this was too much, too fast. They didn’t want to lose the quality of the place they had,” Sirota says. Most recognized, however, that they could not stop all development in their area. The charrette gave them

Developer Carl Wright hired a new urbanist master planner to develop plans for Kennedyville, Md. After community feedback, the final design incorporated a corner store and duplexes.



the opportunity to shape the new neighborhood to address their desires and concerns.

“We had to learn together at every step about the trade-offs you have to make,” Sirota says. “For example, they wanted to ensure that people who live there could actually buy there. They didn’t want it just to be an exclusive, second-home kind of place. People didn’t want sprawl, but they resisted anything that wasn’t a single-family house. They wanted affordable, but they wanted large houses that were on large lots, because they thought that would ensure stable residents. Townhomes, which are more affordable, to them were an invitation to crime.”

Tryon Farm is a conservation subdivision in northwest Indiana. This 40-acre field is farmed and permanently preserved. The preserved barn is enjoyed by the residents.



Photos courtesy of LandChoices

The ultimate design, rendered after several iterations of feedback from the community, envisioned a pocket park open to all, a corner shop where the land met the state highway, and plans for “semi-detached” duplexes that looked like a single house.

“When we started we had people yelling at us, and at the end the same people stood up and applauded,” Sirota said. “They thanked us for listening and working with them, even though they didn’t like absolutely everything about what we were planning.”

But the struggles to create a compatible development for the rural area didn’t end there. After the approvals were secured, which took about a year, the developer began working with a national builder, who pushed for higher prices and seemed to misread the market, Sirota said. When that builder pulled out, the developer found a more local builder, who scaled back the prices and began selling homes, even as the market was entering the current slump. “Even though not much is selling in the county, it’s doing fairly well,” Sirota said.

The trouble with planning in rural areas is that most communities have very limited resources, said Kirt Manecke, a former salesman who started a group called Land Choices to advocate for conservation design in his home state of Michigan.

“The people we work with are the nice people who are volunteer planners,” says Manecke. “They are a plumber by day and a planning commissioner by night. We try to help them understand a lot of these issues, because all this stuff is foreign to them.”

Officials often express a desire to preserve their landscapes and working farms, but then adopt zoning that mandates subdivisions with equal sized lots, or lots that are too large for clustering. Some, of course, have no zoning at all, so adopting land-use regulations often must be the hard-won step one.

To help visual learners, Manecke carries a card showing a “cookie-cutter” subdivision — in which all of a given parcel of land is carved into equal-sized lots — along side a conservation subdivision, where homes are grouped in nodes according to topography, leaving most of the land open. “I’ve never had anyone point to the cookie-cutter subdivision and say, ‘That’s where I want to live.’ They always want to pick the conservation subdivision. And the developers are learning that you can build the same number of houses, but save money on the land clearing.”

After finding some success promoting the model around his home of Farmington Hills, Manecke has launched a national campaign dubbed “Supersize My Backyard,” which he hopes will lure more citizens into advocating for design that preserves 50 percent or more of rural lands. He stresses that, in order to save meaningful wildlife habitat, “what we really want to see is linking the contiguous swaths of preserved land.”

“I might be idealistic but I think, gosh, you know, in 50 or 100 years we might not have any of this stuff if we don’t do something like this.”

In Rhinebeck, meanwhile, landowners, citizens and local officials are still working out the kinks in an alternative plan with the help of Arendt, who was hired by the landowners to offer a workable solution.

“As we were driving to the area I said, ‘I am in favor of building right next to existing population centers,’” Arendt recalls. “But then I walked the land and saw the steep slopes, a working lumber yard within the planned ‘node’ and the drainage issues. It was simply unsuited to a traditional neighborhood development. On paper it looked terrific, but when you got below the surface there were problems. I said if you want to do Smart Growth, let’s do something we can do.”

Working with five area landowners and local citizens, Arendt devised a plan to group the 200 units in pockets on 15 percent of their land while preserving the rest. The owners of property that remained undeveloped would sell, or “transfer”, their development rights to those whose land on which was built.

“At first the town only saw us as being NIMBY,” or Not in My Backyard, Anthone recalls. “But when you looked at it from a practical perspective, there was no developer who was going to build on those slopes, with the wetlands and streams draining to the Hudson.”

While the 20-acre zonings would merely have created “large-lot sprawl”, the new plan “protects special viewsheds and watersheds, as well as the hamlet and our historic district, and allows for growth,” Anthone says. The planning is ongoing because the transfer of developments rights can be tricky, and the town is working to ensure moderate and affordable housing, because “we don’t want to be just the place you commute to the city from,” Anthone says.

As for the key lesson learned: “You can’t just say you don’t want something without an alternative plan that is viable, because the alternative could be much worse.” ●

David A. Goldberg is the communications director for Smart Growth America, a nationwide coalition based in Washington, D.C. that advocates for land-use policy reform. In 2002, Mr. Goldberg was awarded a Loeb Fellowship at Harvard University, where he studied urban policy.

Top photo: Landowners turned down a developer’s proposal that would have destroyed the 50-acre orchard on this 120-acre property named The Ponds at Woodward in Pennsylvania. Developers received a 62 percent greater return by preserving the orchard in a conservation design subdivision with 57 homes. As a result, two-thirds of the property has been permanently protected, including 10 acres of mature woodlands and a working orchard (producing apples and peaches) encompassing more than 50 acres.

Bottom photo: Trim’s Ridge in Rhode Island is a 10-acre conservation design subdivision, located in New Harbor, New Shoreham, R.I., which protects three-fourths of the site as open space.

Photos courtesy of Randall Arendt and LandChoices

