

CONSERVATION SUBDIVISION DESIGN: A CALL FOR STANDARDS TO HELP UNDEVELOPED MINNESOTA MANAGE ITS GROWTH

Ashley A. Ver Burg, Environmental Studies Major '10, College of Saint Benedict
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Derek Larson

Introduction

How can conservation subdivision design help MN grow?

Minnesota is growing, and communities across the state are being pressured to choose conventional development that tends to disregard the importance of creating a unique sense of place. Such development often fails to preserve the state's natural landscape, which contributes significantly to the Minnesotan identity. Conservation subdivision design is a viable alternative to conventional development that can considerably help the communities that need it most: undeveloped Minnesota. Conservation subdivision design can help Minnesota grow, but inconsistent conceptions of the type of development pose a problem. **The variability in understanding of conservation subdivision design by developers, local units of government, and citizens indicates an absence of clear standards that are essential to effectively accommodate the future growth of Minnesota.** True conservation subdivision design has the potential to preserve Minnesotan character, but first, clear standards must be set.

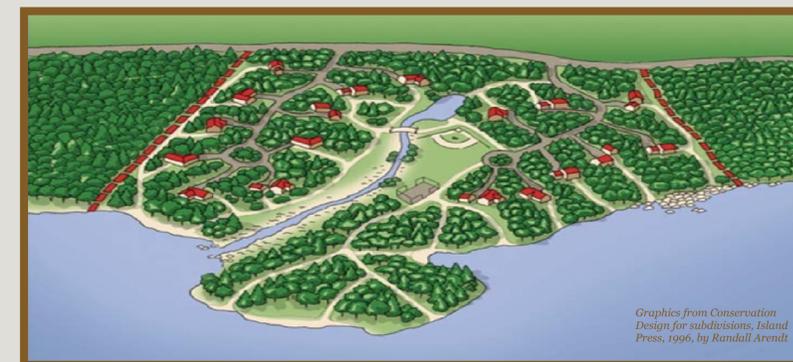
The Difference

What makes conservation subdivision design unique?

Conventional Subdivision Design



Conservation Subdivision Design



Conservation subdivision design can be characterized in the picture above by:

- Ideal preservation of natural and cultural areas.
- 40–80% of developable land becomes common open space in perpetuity.
- Buildings and roads positioned strategically to fit the ecological integrity of the land.
- All property owners have equal access to water, regardless of lot location.
- Walking trails, parks, and shared water create a unique sense of community.

Conventional subdivision design can be characterized in the picture to the left by:

- Land divided into equal parts.
- Buildings and roads positioned for convenience.
- Little or no common open space.
- Only lakeshore lots have access to water.
- Poor consideration of preserving ecological integrity of land.

Methods

A variety of interviews, literature reviews, and statistical analyses were conducted. The main subjects studied include:

Governmental Agencies

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
Minnesota State Demographer's Office

Environmental Organizations

The Minnesota Land Trust
The National Land Trust
1000 Friends of Minnesota

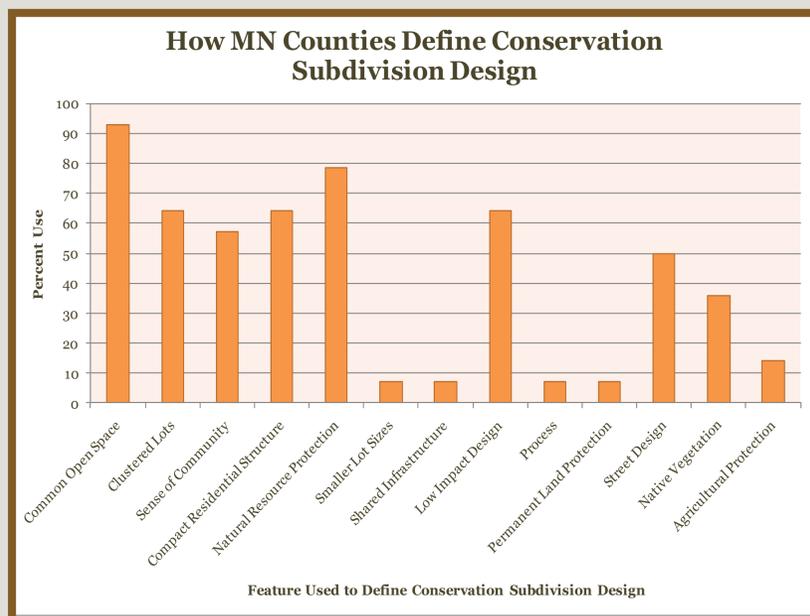
Developers and Planners

Randall Arendt, Landscape Architect and Conservation Design Expert
Robert Engstrom Companies, MN Conservation Subdivision Design Developer
Harold Teasdale, MN Conservation Subdivision Design Developer

Local Units of Government

Minnesota Counties, Comprehensive Plans and County Ordinances

Data



Graph 1. Percent of counties using the above features in their definitions of conservation subdivision design

Minnesota communities exhibit a significant variability in features used to define conservation subdivision design.

"There is no one saying we have to have what we've always had. We can have far better."
Randall Arendt, June 2009 Brooklyn Center, MN

23 of Minnesota's 87 counties reference Conservation Subdivision Design in a formal county ordinance or comprehensive plan.

15 of 23 define the term.

4 use the same definition.

3 have ordinances supporting comprehensive plan calls for conservation subdivision design.

Inconsistent views are problematic:

- Developers propose conservation subdivisions that do not match communities' standards.
- Comprehensive plans lack the legal authority of ordinances.
- State-wide legislation, projects, and grants pertaining to conservation subdivision design are difficult to implement.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to the following individuals whose knowledge, insight, leadership, professional work, personal research, criticism, and encouragement was invaluable in the development of this research: Derek Larson of the CSB|SJU Environmental Studies Department, Phil Hunsicker of 1000 Friends of Minnesota, Randall Arendt of Greener Prospects, Robert Engstrom of Engstrom Development Companies, Anna Schumacher of McDonald 114 and the Commons, Nick Hansen of ENVR 395, CSB|SJU Environmental Studies Faculty, family, friends, and all the outstanding professionals working toward preserving the unique natural cultural in state of Minnesota.

Conclusion

Growth in the state of Minnesota may be inevitable, but the loss of Minnesotan identity that is deeply rooted in its natural landscape is not. The natural landscape plays a significant role in regional culture, which fosters a sense of appeal to live in the area. Conservation subdivision design can address this problem specifically in undeveloped areas under growth pressure, as well as preserve the Minnesotan natural identity. **In order to be an effective tool to address growth pressure, developers, local units of government, and citizens need to have a common understanding of the term conservation subdivision design.** Leadership is essential. Improved standards could take various forms, but we need to find a common language. Minnesota's growth is coming, whether we plan for it or not.

Will we be ready?

