



Conservation Subdivisions

What is a conservation subdivision? How does it work?

A conservation subdivision is an alternative to conventional subdivision development patterns, which typically produce only house lots and streets. A conservation subdivision is informed by valued open lands present on the site, and the size and location of these valued open lands become the central organizing element when designing the subdivision.

While the overall “yield” or number of lots developed remain the same, they are configured in a manner that conserve lands valued by a community as open space. Open spaces may include cultural features, critical ecological elements, agricultural fields, or recreational spaces like trails. Conservation subdivisions can be seen as the building blocks of a community's green infrastructure network, as each subdivision can be informed by the overall municipal green infrastructure map. When conservation subdivisions serve as a building block of a community's green infrastructure, the purpose for open space within a development becomes clear, and a community can realize its system without being dependent on expensive acquisition programs.

What are the benefits of conservation subdivisions?

Communities should first identify areas for open space conservation within their city limits. One of the best ways to network open spaces and create a cohesive system that conserves what is valuable to community residents is to adopt a detailed municipal green infrastructure network map. Together, a municipal green infrastructure network map and a conservation style of development present municipalities with a way to conserve valued open lands within city limits.

How could municipalities implement conservation subdivisions?

Adopt a municipal green infrastructure network map.

The municipal green infrastructure network map developed as a part of a project provides a great framework for open space conservation. Some cities could choose to adopt their green infrastructure network as is, though most will want to add some detail. Municipal staff of a community could host an inexpensive event modeled on the regional visioning workshop to glean added layers of detail for its map. Or, a municipality could choose to let the detail emerge as developers analyze the land they are developing and create conservation style developments that respect community open space values.

Adopt clear standards to guide the conservation subdivision process.

The conservation subdivision style of development could be used to guide some or all future residential, commercial and retail development in a municipality, but a process to guide the design process should be adopted. There is more detail in the supplemental materials provided with this document and in general reviews of planning document distributed at an earlier date, but to summarize, the usual planning process should be reversed. Developers should:

1. *Identify open lands with cultural, ecological, agricultural and/or recreational value.*
2. *Respect valuable open spaces, identify potential areas for development & locate home sites.*
3. *Align streets and trails.*
4. *Draw in the lot lines, without concern for uniform lot size.*

This sequence will enable developers to build the same number of house lots that zoning permits, and it establishes a means for open space conservation to occur utilizing simple design guidelines.

Note: Communities should make sure that their open space values are reflected in both their general plans and subdivision regulations. While general plans usually do account for these spaces, a means identifying them and designing around them are not usually present in subdivision regulations. The four-step design process highlighted above brings consistency to a community's planning documents.