

How to Make Cluster Zoning Work in Your Community

Overview

In the next 25 years, Greater Gardner is expected grow by 16,000 residents. If growth proceeds according to current patterns, it will consume 8,400 acres of farmland, forests, and other open space, transforming much of the region from a rural to a suburban landscape. Cluster zoning is a tool to reduce the land-consumptiveness of new development and to permanently protect open space.

Benefits of Cluster Zoning

Using land more efficiently can benefit both the economy and the environment. Here's how:

- **Protect Open Space:** Effective cluster zoning often results in the protection of 50% or more of a site as open space. The town can decide what types of open space it wishes to protect (farms, greenways, etc.), and use cluster zoning to help protect this land permanently through easements or other mechanisms.
- **Save Money:** Site development costs for cluster developments can be 25-50% less than for conventional developments, depending on the site (see cost comparison below). This money represents increased profit for the developer or landowner, or savings for the homebuyer.
- **Amenities:** Cluster zoning can be used to protect scenic roadsides, provide land for new recreation facilities, or create a link in a townwide trail system.

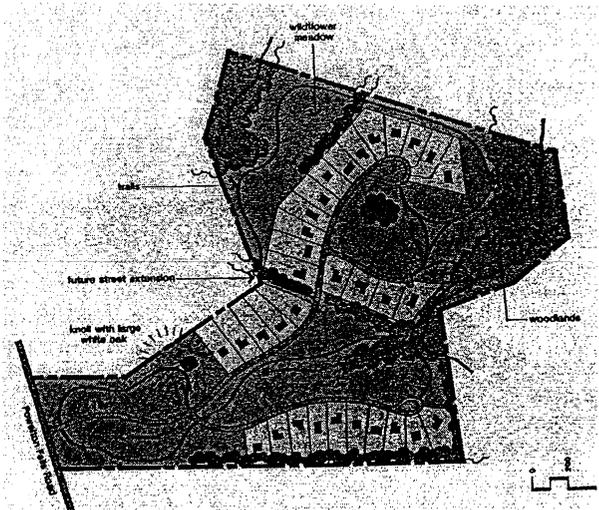
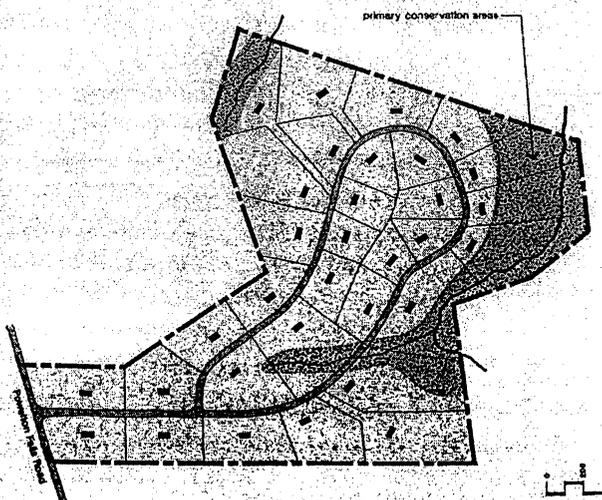
- **Environmental Compatibility:** By using varied lot sizes and frontages, and by utilizing shared septic facilities, cluster development can be more compatible with the site's topographic, soil and vegetational characteristics.

How to Make Cluster Work Better

An effective cluster zoning law clearly spells out the town's objectives, while providing adequate incentives for developers to propose cluster developments. Specifically:

Define Your Town's Open Space Objectives:

The bylaw must state the minimum criteria for land to be protected, and what types of open space are acceptable or preferred. Typically, at least 30% of the parcel should be protected as open space, excluding wetlands and other unbuildable land. The bylaw should state the legal mechanism that will ensure permanent protection (see box, below).



These diagrams compare conventional to cluster development for an actual 82-acre site containing several environmental and scenic features including riparian forest, a wildflower meadow, and a scenic grassy knoll. The conventional subdivision, at left, divides the entire parcel into 32 private house lots, consuming all the open space with the exception of wetlands. The cluster subdivision, above, also provides 32 house lots, but groups them together in order to set aside significant site features, such as meadows, roadside views, specimen trees, and a public trail system.

Streamline the Process: Cluster development should be placed on equal footing with conventional development by doing one of the following:

- Require the developer to submit two plans (conventional and cluster), from which the Planning Board chooses and approves their preferred plan.
- Allow cluster development as-of-right in certain zones.

In any case, an important part of effective cluster zoning is close collaboration between the developer and the Planning Board to identify important site features and designate open space areas that meet both the developer's and the town's needs.

Provide Incentives: As shown in the following table, cluster development has cost incentives of its own. Some towns have found that a small density bonus can result in much greater use of cluster zoning, and such a bonus could be linked to the developer providing certain amenities, such as public playing fields.

- ◆ How do you deal with sewage disposal in cluster developments with smaller lots?
See **Tools for Communities: Sheet 3**
- ◆ How can cluster developments on adjacent parcels be grouped to create cohesive villages?
See **Tools for Communities: Sheet 2**

Will the Open Space be Permanently Protected?

One common concern about cluster zoning is that the designated open space could be developed in the future as growth pressure increases. With a good cluster zoning bylaw, however, that scenario is extremely unlikely. The bylaw should require that a *conservation restriction*—a legal covenant prohibiting future development—be placed on the designated open space. Like a utility easement, a conservation restriction is a legal deed restriction that “runs with the land” and cannot be removed even if the land changes hands. Once the conservation restriction is in place, the town may allow the open space to be owned and managed by a homeowners’ association, a nonprofit land conservation group, or the town’s own Conservation Commission.

The Bottom Line

Cluster developments typically provide savings in the cost of site work, roadways, and sewage disposal systems, which may create increased profit for the developer. The following sample cost comparison is for a 24-unit subdivision on a moderately hilly site with no public water or sewer system. Cost for the water system is omitted from the comparison because it is the same for both developments. Conventional zoning is assumed to be 60,000 s.f. with 175’ minimum frontage (typical of rural areas in Greater Gardner), while cluster zoning is 12,000 s.f. with 75’ frontage.

Development Cost	Conventional Subdivision	Cluster Subdivision
Earthwork ¹	16 acres \$939,000	7 acres \$411,000
Roadways ²	2,625 linear ft. \$328,000	1,125 linear ft. \$141,000
Sewage disposal	24 on-site septic \$181,000	1 clustered sep. \$124,000
Total	\$1,448,000	\$676,000
Cost per unit	\$60,333	\$28,167

1. Assumes generalized site conditions typical of Greater Gardner and includes clearing & grubbing woods; stripping, grading and re-spreading earth and topsoil for roads and the developed portions of lots; surveying; and erosion control. Assumes clearing and grading on only the developed portions of the lots: 25 ksf for conventional and 10 ksf for cluster lots.
2. Roadway: double-loaded with 80% efficiency.

While costs may vary significantly depending on the site, availability of infrastructure and other considerations, this comparison shows that clustering houselots can reduce site development costs by up to 50%.

For more information:

- The Citizen Planner Training Collaborative is a great resource for communities, and provides sample bylaws for cluster zoning and other tools. Call 413-545-2188 or visit www.umass.edu/masscptc.
- *Conservation Design for Subdivisions* by Randall Arendt is a comprehensive guide to cluster zoning with numerous examples and pictures illustrating the concept. You can view excerpts or order the book at www.islandpress.com.

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