The Park at Wolf Branch Oaks:
Designing Around 13 Acres of Mature Live Oaks

by Randall Arendt

Location: Wolf Branch Road, Lake County, FL
Developer: Dr. Eric Coe, Leesburg, FL
Site Designer: Randall Arendt, FRTPI, Brunswick Maine
Development Period: 1998 to 2003

The genesis of this rural neighborhood design was a one-day conference convened by Lake County officials and planning staff, who wanted to expose local landowners, developers, and engineers to two complementary approaches to land-use planning: the New Urbanism for areas in and adjacent to towns, and conservation subdivision design for properties in outlying areas zoned for suburban development.

Following presentations by Andres Duany and the site designer, the owner of a rural property located four miles east of Mt. Dora asked me to walk his land and help him devise a sensitive plan that would preserve its beautiful natural features: the dozens of large live oak trees that populated this otherwise open, relatively flat, 116-acre cow pasture.

After walking the site and examining an aerial photo to locate the most outstanding trees and tree groups, the need to create a central park became clear. As the principal natural feature of the property, it was decided to encircle it with a street, ensuring its high visibility. Other trees were similarly designed around and conserved, adding further value and market appeal to the layout. In some cases, a large tree or small group became "terminal vistas" on sensitively aligned and curved streets. This park has become a popular place for residents to walk and relax, and is shared by sandhill cranes who visit regularly, as well as other suburban wildlife.

Figures 1 and 2: A four-rail fence runs along Wolf Branch Road and the edge of the foreground meadow, adding to the neighborhood's rural character. The concept plan shows how the site's most significant value-adding trees were designed around, and how the view from Wolf Branch Road was respected by creating a 300-foot deep buffer and facing 18 homes toward it, instead of presenting rear yards to the public or building suburban berms. Source: Randall Arendt

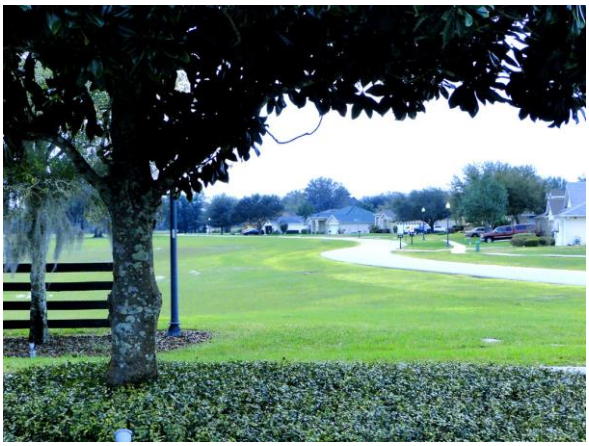
In addition, the land closest to Wolf Branch Road was designated as an open space buffer where stormwater could be directed for on-site infiltration and recharge. This 300-foot deep open area,

Figures 3 and 4: Part of the central park and several homes facing it from across the street that encircles it can be seen in the photo (right). Sandhill cranes are frequent visitors to the central park (right). Source: Randall Arendt

known as a "foreground meadow" (see Figure 3), also buffers the homes from passing traffic and provides a greater degree of seclusion and privacy as well. The design decision was taken to orient homes to face Wolf Branch Road, maximizing backyard privacy and creating a more appealing public viewshed. In other words, the typical "fanny first" design", where developers back homes up to public roads, was intentionally rejected. That design approach was also avoided around the central park, which most developers would have encircled with back yards.

Figure 5: The aerial photo shows how faithful the final engineered design is to the original sketch (seen in Fig.1). One reason is that beginning the design process by defining the value-adding greenspace helped the developer gain county approval, as the layout was consistent with county planning policies for protecting rural character and replenishing aquifers through upland open space, a critically important way of recharging groundwater resources. Source: Google Earth

After re-zoning from more rural multi-acre density to a density of one acre per dwelling, the property was permitted to have 116 houselots, which were allowed to range in area from 12,000 to 30,000 sq. ft., with a minimum width of 80 feet -- reductions that enabled the developer to surpass the basic 50 percent open space requirement. Approximately half of the lots enjoy open space views both front and back, while the others either face onto open space or back up to it. Water supply is provided through a private central system on the property, and wastewater is treated in septic drainfields on each lot. Street pavement width requirements were reduced to 18 feet (16 feet for the entranceway), without curbing. Stormwater is handled through grassy swales alongside the streets, which works well as the property is underlain by permeable sandy soils.



Figures 6 and 7: The 300-foot deep "foreground meadow as seen from Wolf Branch Road (left), and as seen from the first street in the neighborhood. Besides protecting rural character, this buffer significantly lessens traffic noise from the public road, which has become significantly more busy as development occurs on other properties in the area. Source: Randall Arendt

Approvals were issued after a relatively brief and uncomplicated review process, as county staff and officials wanted to encourage this form of development, as it furthers their Comprehensive Plan's open space and rural character objectives. Fortunately, the project engineer and landscape architect completely understood the design goals established in the conceptual planning stage, further helping the process run smoothly.

This sensitive neighborhood design quickly became popular in the marketplace, appealing to consumers who wanted to live in pleasant, semi-rural surroundings not far from town with its shops, services, and jobs, and has been continuously cited by county staff and officials as an outstanding example of conservation design for others to emulate.

Figure 8: Another view of the development from Wolf Branch Road showing homes facing onto the meadow and toward the front edge of the property, which is bordered with a four-rail fence. Developers can afford to leave one side of an interior street open by using the clustering principle to reallocate density to other parts of the neighborhood. Source: Randall Arendt