

Stratford Hall: *Redesigning a Property to Inaugurate Conservation Design*

by Randall Arendt

Location: Weddington, NC

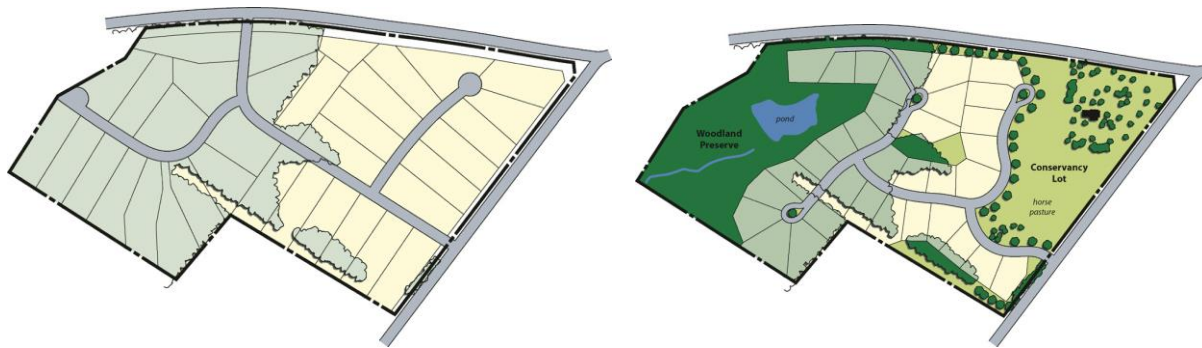
Developer: Fairview Developers, Inc., Greg Williams, President, Monroe, NC

Site Designer: Randall Arendt, FRTPI, Brunswick, Maine

Dates: 2003-2005

The genesis of this project was a workshop presentation by the site designer on conservation subdivision design principles to leading public officials in Union County, sponsored by the County Co-operative Extension Service. Among the participants was Ed Howie, then Mayor of Weddington, a small upscale rural town several miles southeast of Charlotte, located squarely in the path of development.

Following further presentations, several public meetings, and technical assistance in ordinance drafting from planners at the Centralina COG, the Council voted to adopt a conservation subdivision ordinance in 2002. Greg Williams, of Fairview Developers, who had purchased this property with a previously approved subdivision plan, approached the Mayor about my reworking the layout for Stratford Hall, which met the existing code but was not well received. The main problem, from a viewshed perspective, was that two long sides of the property, which were bordered by well-travelled local roads, were proposed to be lined with double-frontage lots backing up to those streets, creating unpleasant views from those roads. In the open farming landscape, their back sides of the houses would be conspicuously on public view, creating a very unattractive “fanny-first” appearance with pressure-treated decks and sliding glass doors dominating the streetscape as seen by all passing motorists. Another problem with the original layout was that it would have divided the entire property into houselots and streets with no open space, resulting in a small pond being sliced into three ownerships, denying neighborhood residents the pleasure of walking around its shoreline.



Figures 1 and 2: A before-and-after pair of sketch plans showing the differences between a conventional layout and a conservation design. The standard plat compromises the public viewshed with lower-value lots backing up to the two public roads instead of creating a large, high-value conservancy lot at the corner. In the conservation design, homes are buffered from the two public roadways and residents have an attractive woodland park to enjoy, with trails ringing the pond. The financial success of Stratford Hall has spurred a dozen similar “twice green” developments in Weddington, testament to the superior economic benefits this design approach provides developers, and the appeal of good design to home-buyers and residents of the area. Also note that street length was shortened in the conservation design, in spite of the fact that much of it is “single-loaded” (homes on one side only, to opening it to value-adding views of the conservation land. Source: Natural Lands Trust



Figures 3 and 4: Views from the public road into Stratford Hall, preserving Weddington’s rural character. Note that homes face forward onto open space so that their back yards remain private. Source: Randall Arendt

After walking the 35-acre property and determining that the two highest conservation priorities were the pond and surrounding woodlands, plus the public viewshed, these areas were “greenlined” and set aside as the first step in the design process. (It is critically important to design the open space areas first, lest they become afterthoughts, as they are in many “planned unit developments”). Golf course development design follows the same sequence, with the open space designed during the very first step. Conservation designs are sometimes referred to as “golf course communities without the golf course, with greenways instead of fairways”.)

Next, house positions were located to maximize open space views from each home, and a street and trail system were laid out to connect everything. Finally, lot lines were drawn in. The 35 lots were generally 100 feet wide and 150 feet deep, most facing onto or backing up to preserved open space. All lots are served by public sewerage, although there was suitable land for a community wastewater system had that been necessary. The 35 lots consume approximately 12 acres, the streets take up about 2.5 acres leaving 18.5 acres of upland open space, plus two acres of wetland or open water.

In addition to the value added by making the pond and wooded parkland around it accessible to all neighborhood residents, a large eight-acre “conservancy lot” was created as a weekend farmette, featuring a large residence and horse pastures framing the public viewshed and establishing an upscale equestrian atmosphere for the entire development. With conservation easements protecting both the common open space and the “non-common” conservancy lot, none of this land will be further developed. Creating a conservancy lot is a useful approach for reducing the maintenance responsibilities for the homeowner association and for enhancing the developer’s rate of return on investment, 90 percent of it is counted as open space.

One of the public benefits of the approved plan is the orientation of the homes that avoids rear elevations facing onto the two well-traveled roads bordering the property, a flaw of the original layout. This benefits the developer as well, because lots that do not back up to public roads command higher prices and sell faster than those that do.