

Westwood Common:

Blending New Urbanism with Conservation Design

By Randall Arendt

Location: Village of Village of Beverly Hills, Southfield Township. Oakland County, MI

Development Period: 1996-98

Developer and Builder: David Jensen, Beverly Hills, MI

Site Designer: Gibbs Planning Group, Birmingham, MI

With its rather formal site design, this project demonstrates that the basic principles of conservation design are fully compatible with those of the “new urbanism”. The central green, which covers approximately half an acre, possesses an interesting trapezoidal shape and is bounded by streets on two sides only. On the other two sides, homes front directly onto this open space, separated only by a paved footpath. As all the houses at Westwood Common have garages accessed *via* back lanes or shared drives, this novel design approach is easy to achieve. Local fire officials who reviewed the plan prior to approval were satisfied that the layout would not pose problems for their crews. When one pauses to think about it, there is no reason that streets must run alongside the front of all houselots.



Figure 1. The site plan shows how the homes on the northern end face directly onto the half-acre green, with rear drives accessing garages in back. The homes on the eastern side are situated on a downward slope, overlooking the riverside greenway park. The pre-existing historic house is shown in black. The central green contains a small area of manicured turf for lawn bowling.

Located 13 miles north of Detroit in the Village of Beverly Hills (population 10,500), fully 70 percent of this property is dedicated as permanent open space, including about 12 acres through which flows a 1,000-foot section of the Rouge River. Although much of that land is either wet or floodprone, this conservation parcel could have easily been divided and added to a number of the abutting houselots, denying the rest of the residents any access to or enjoyment of this special part of the property. Plans for this open space include a woodland walking trail network, meadows for informal games, and a gazebo overlooking a pond that will have a fountain during the summer and provide for skating in mid-winter, all of which enhance the quality of life at Westwood Common.

The phenomenal market success of Westwood Common is perhaps the most remarkable part of this story. Despite the fact that prevailing prices in all the surrounding neighborhoods were in the \$150,000 to \$300,000 price range, homes at Westwood Common sold for between \$475,000 and \$875,000 in the late 1990s. They are, of course, commodious and very nicely appointed (with 2,600 to 3,900 square feet of floor area), but the real key to their salability lies mostly with the masterful site design produced by the Gibbs Planning Group. Here buyers recognized the opportunity to live in a neighborhood that was full of character and brimming with open space, views of which are framed by the windows of 20 of the 23 homes. Nine of the houses, on the eastern side, feature walk-out basements as well. The developer reports that homes held their values nicely during the economic downturn after 2007.



Figure 2. Porch views from homes fronting onto the central green are uninterrupted by street pavement, creating a sense of neighborhood intimacy. Fire officials are satisfied they can reach the homes via the back drives and also by running their hoses a little more than 100 feet from the street.

Testimony for the value enhancement of the site design is the fact that a preexisting house fronting onto one of the public roads bordering the property rose in value from \$150,000 to \$280,000 after it was incorporated into the new neighborhood through minor alterations to reorient the garage and driveway so they both faced in the opposite direction, toward the new internal subdivision street. (Interestingly, that homeowner had been one of the most vocal opponents of the project when it was under municipal review, claiming that the relatively narrow lots (40 to 60 feet wide, compared with over 100 feet in the surrounding neighborhood) would negatively impact on existing home values.)



Figure 3. View of the central green and homes framing its far side, as seen from the internal street (left), and the walking trail through the river greenway park behind nine of the homes.

Westwood Common also demonstrates that decision running counter to prevailing trends and conventional wisdom can pay handsome dividends. This development, which outperformed all other subdivisions in the county, achieved this distinction with lots ranging from 5,000 to 7,000square feet, essentially one-quarter the usual minimum lot size in the district (25,000 square feet). All homes are served by public water and sewer.

The only homes located on larger lots are the three pre-existing residences, two of which came with substantial acreage, including a historic sandstone house moved to the property many years ago from Grosse Pointe. However, that home in particular has been incorporated into the streetscape and frames the southern edge of the central green.