

Hawksnest:

Creating a Large Central Meadow and Pond, and Connecting to a Regional Trail

by Randall Arendt

Location: Maple Avenue (Highway E), Delafield, WI

Developer: Siepmann Realty, Waukesha, WI

Site Designer: Nick Patera PLA, Teska Associates, Evanston IL

Landscape Architect: Judith Stark Associates, Chenequa WI

Development Period: 1990-99

This 155-acre project, located 20 miles west of Milwaukee and not far from I-94, exemplifies the “twice green” concept of conservation subdivisions: green both environmentally and financially. Defying the then-current conventional wisdom in the area, it conclusively demonstrated that homebuyers are very willing to trade large lots and no open space for smaller lots with significant conservation land and related amenities. And that smart developers can profit handsomely from this approach.



Figures 1 and 2: The two major open spaces are the wooded ridge where the Ice Age Trail runs, and the 15-acre central park with its ponds, wildflower meadows, and recreational amenities. The photo at right shows the well-buffered view from Highway E.

Interestingly, this 71-lot project began with the pro-active acquisition of the property by the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation, which stepped in to buy it from several landowners who had been approached by a local developer who intended to spread houselots and streets across the entire parcel. The Foundation then contacted Siepmann Realty Company (SRC), a regional development firm in Waukesha which had established a strong reputation for creating highly successful subdivisions with significant open space in the Milwaukee suburbs. Working with a progressive developer was essential because the Foundation could not afford to hold the property indefinitely, and needed to find a way to preserve the ridgeline and adjacent slopes to complete a 3,000-foot section of the 1,200-mile long Ice Age Trail (one of the country’s eleven National Scenic Trails, administered by the National Park Service with many local partners).

As it always does, SRC hired a firm experienced in creating neighborhoods where open space is a dominant feature, and began the design process by carefully evaluating the site, identifying lands to be conserved as the first step. This approach, normal when laying out subdivisions around new golf courses, was different from the way that most developers approach a property: hiring engineers to lay streets out

across all of the buildable land, saving only the highly constrained wetlands, floodplains, and steep slopes which could not be developed in any case, a mostly self-serving technique known as “clustering”.

Following its more enlightened but also profit-driven approach, SRC identified otherwise buildable acreage and green-lined it to become value-adding conservation areas. So, in addition to preserving the site’s low-lying wetter soils and the steep or wooded areas (located within Wisconsin’s “Primary Environmental Corridor”), which would not have been developed in any case, SRC preserved parts of several farm fields for prairie restoration, sections of several hedgerows, and the very buildable glacial-moraine ridge at the back of the property, allowing for construction of the Ice Age Trail, from which hikers now enjoy lovely views of nearby Pewaukee Lake. Altogether, 80 acres, covering about half of the site, were preserved.



Figures 3 and 4: The southern end of the central park (left), and a larger view of the two-acre pond.

In addition to preserving the ridgeline and associated slopes, and building a section of the Ice Age Trail along the ridge, SRC created a 15-acre central parkland that forms a “terminal vista” to everyone entering Hawksnest from either of its two principal entrances along Highway E. To maximize value-adding views of this park, a subdivision street runs along its curving perimeter, with homes on only one side, facing the open space across the roadway. Most developers do not fully appreciate the significant value created by maximizing open space views from roadways, a design practice that creates a strong and priceless parklike atmosphere enabling lot premiums to be added to lots with no direct view of the central park.

This park includes four meadows, encompassing about four acres, planted with native wildflowers, a two-acre pond (for winter ice skating), a children’s’ play area, a soccer field, a softball diamond, two tennis courts, and a gazebo for residents and guests to relax in. Two smaller ponds, flanking the neighborhood’s southern entrance, provide opportunities to collect sediment from stormwater runoff before it leaves the property and flows down toward Pewaukee Lake.

In addition, four other conservation meadows with wildflowers and other traditional prairie vegetation have been planted beyond the central park, creating considerable color in the spring and summer landscapes. The value of these areas lies not only in their expansion of wildlife habitat, but also in lower maintenance costs for the conventional alternative: lawn turf. The additional money spent on these green site improvements (including moving many trees from wooded areas to open areas, and bringing in many new ones) more than paid for themselves through lot premiums and faster sales.

The “twice green” reputation of conservation subdivisions certainly applies to Hawksnest: lot sale prices, which ranged from \$66,000 to \$75,000 during the 1990s, were about 50 percent above the average developed-lot cost (\$47,200). This is particularly significant because the conventional wisdom among

developers in this conservative, semi-rural area, was that customers intending to build large homes would not be interested in lots smaller than two to three acres. (Note: Homes on Hawksnest's 71 lots, averaging one acre in area, were upmarket and definitely not small, particularly for their time, ranging from 3,000 to 5,500 SF.) In recognition of its multiple successes, Hawksnest received a Standard of Excellence Award from the Metropolitan Builders Association of Greater Milwaukee in 1992.

Lot sales were brisk, in spite of their pricing being about equal to lots three times larger in conventional developments built to the town's standard lot area requirements in this zoning district. Siepmann Realty credits much of this success to the far greater appeal that the highly visible and attractive open space holds for many potential buyers. If they question why the average one-acre lots at Hawksnest cost nearly as much as three-acre lots in nearby subdivisions, it is explained that residents here own 81 acres (their individual lot plus the common open space) instead of just three acres (with no place to walk or park to recreate in). When people recognize how much more they are buying into, they often decide to opt for the greener neighborhood. Hawksnest's decidedly green site design impressed local officials as well, who approved this large development in just five months. Notably, there was almost no neighborhood opposition, many residents voicing their support at public meetings, partly because of increased accessibility to the Ice Age Trail.



Figures 5 and 6: A section of the Ice Age Trail runs along the top of the wooded ridge, with neighborhood trail connections off to one side. The ridge is a terminal moraine marking the southernmost extent of glaciation; the trail, half of which has been completed, is planned to extend nearly 1,200 across the state. Coneflowers are one of many native wildflower species planted by the developer to restore prairie vegetation in six parts of this remarkable subdivision.

The firm's philosophy can be traced back to the childhood years of its first president, Ron Siepmann, who grew up in a planned neighborhood in Wauwatosa called Washington Highlands. Designed by architect Werner Hegemann and landscape architect Elbert Peets, this very special community contained central open space where kids ran around, played catch, waded in a little stream, and skated on a small pond during the cold Wisconsin winters. Those formative years greatly influenced Ron Siepmann's ideas when he entered the family development business in 1957, and continue to guide it under the stewardship of the current generation. Today the firm has preserved more than 1,800 acres in its various subdivisions.



Figures 7 and 8: Homes at Hawsknest range in size from 3,000 to 5,500 SF of floorspace. Almost all are custom built.



Figures 9 and 10: One of the cul-de-sac islands (left) covers nearly one acre of conservation land and is planted with numerous crabapple trees in an ordered, orchard-like manner. On the right a street was laid out to parallel one of the dairy farm's old hedgerows, which was "green-lined" on the site plan and designed around, preserving part of the site's rural character.