



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Conservation Development

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DEM has some very sound regulations to help prevent development impacts to natural resources such as water quality and wetlands. However, these regulations by themselves are not sufficient to achieve DEM's mission of preserving, protecting and restoring RI's environment. DEM does not have any regulations to prevent development impacts to our farms, forests and habitat. Moreover, it is not possible to buy all the land needed to protect important natural resources. The primary cause for environmental degradation is growth and land use, which is exclusively governed by local cities and towns.

Therefore, the DEM Sustainable Watersheds Office has formed partnerships with communities and has been providing technical and financial assistance to help them more effectively plan for growth to minimize impacts to the environment and community character. It is not growth itself that is necessarily the problem. Instead, it is the way most towns allow or mandate growth to occur that is the issue. With the use of more creative development techniques with an emphasis on compact growth new development can proceed while avoiding impacts to the environment and our quality of life.

Impacts of past growth

- Between 1964 and 1997 RI farmland acreage was cut in half from 103,801 to 55,256 acres.
- From 1988-1995 RI lost additional 11,500 acres of working farms and forests, which is an area approximately the size of Providence
- Between 1961 and 1995 state population increased by 16% but land consumption increased by 147%. Developed more land than in previous 325 year history of RI
- RI Statewide planning estimates we will need an additional 108,00 acres to meet demand over next 20 years for growth, based on population, housing and economic projections.
- Roughly 70% of this total will be for low-density single-family homes. That means 3 existing rural towns will be converted to suburban communities over the next 20 years.

What is conservation development?

Conservation development is a more flexible way to accommodate growth while avoiding impacts to the environment and community character. It uses a design process to identify and protect a minimum of 50% of the land that could otherwise be developed as permanently protected open space. The protected open space provides meaningful community assets such as

scenic views, unique habitats, farms, forests, historical sites and other important features. Conservation development allows the same number of house lots as a conventional development, but with smaller lot sizes.

How does conservation development differ from a conventional development?

Conservation development differs from a conventional subdivision in four important ways:

- Conservation development uses development to protect meaningful open space while conventional development yields no open space protection. Typically 50-70% of the land, without development constraints, is permanently protected using conservation development.
- Conservation development is a flexible design process where unique site features of the parcel are identified and preserved in perpetuity. The “cookie cutter” approach, where building sites are created without regard to the natural characteristics of the land, is eliminated. Instead, development is directed to where the land is most suitable and where impacts to natural resources and community character can be avoided.
- Conservation development can be used to create an interconnected network of protected open space throughout the community. This adds value to each open space parcel and helps to create buffers between development, habitat, parks, surface water, wetlands, farms and forests.
- Conservation development is more profitable to developers since homes that are adjacent to permanently protected open space have more value. It also reduces construction costs by reducing road length and land disturbance. This is a win/win scenario for the community, developer, and our environment.



The illustrations above demonstrate how conservation development can be used to protect meaningful open space and community character. From top to bottom: A rural tract as it is today; how the same tract would look if developed under conventional zoning with large scattered lots polluting water bodies, fragmenting habitats and destroying scenic vistas (middle); the same land with the same number of houses, this time developed to preserve natural resources and rural character (bottom).

Interviews:

- Scott Millar, DEM Chief of Sustainable Watersheds (below, left)
- Susan Bourne, a home owner in a Conservation Development (below, middle)
- Fred Presley, Smithfield Town Planner (below, right)

