

Turning the development process on its head

Randall Arendt offers a fresh take on planning and zoning

By Jill Mazullo, director of communications

There is no constitutional right to sprawl.

This may be true, but you wouldn't know it from observing much of our suburban landscape. Randall Arendt is an outspoken critic of the ways communities across the U.S. have allowed zoning to trump planning. Simply put, "We zone for sprawl," he says.

Arendt is a conservation design developer and proponent who speaks to audiences around the country and through his numerous books, such as *Rural By Design*, about how to improve the development process and outcomes. Community Growth Options, a project of 1000 Friends of Minnesota, brought Arendt to speak to representatives of the 10 communities we are working with, along with a public audience, on two occasions in June and October 2009.

His comments were punctuated by dozens of photographs he has taken at conservation developments around the country, as well as shots of less thoughtful streetscapes, parking lots and subdivisions. He has mastered the art of showing what he means, inspiring audience members to eagerly ask how they can make conservation development possible in their communities.

Rethinking the development process

Of particular use to the local officials and planning professionals in the audience was his model for a better development process at the city level. He said that in the current development model, a community asks a developer to bring a preliminary plan to their first meeting. Arendt says this is the first mistake: "Bringing a preliminary plan to a first meeting is like bringing a diamond ring on your first date." There's nothing preliminary about it, says Arendt. So much money has been sunk into the engineering and designs that there is huge pressure to accept the preliminary proposal as a *fait accompli*.

Instead, Arendt urges communities to request a simple concept plan. Then, take a walk of the site with the developer and the planning commission; this would be a legally advertised meeting. Planning commissioners who do not walk the site should not be allowed to vote on the project, he says.

Developers should also provide a context map that details the land intended for development plus a half-mile border around the land. Without the context map, "You're designing a development in a vacuum." With it, you can better identify green corridors, forests, and unbroken hydrology that may guide what happens on the site.

How to communicate what you want to achieve

It seems backwards to Arendt that conventional design – what we typically get in suburban development – is treated as the norm by local governments, while conservation design is a "conditional use," making it lengthier and more uncertain to a developer. Large-lot development should be the conditional use, but instead it is favored by the very process the city sets up, in spite of what its comprehensive plan may say.

Arendt explained it this way: zoning that calls for 5-acre lots, or 2-acre lots, means your community's land will ultimately be divided up that way, and there will be no open space left over.

"If you say you want 3-acre, 12,000 square-foot lots, then that's what you'll get," he says. So what can you do differently? "If you say you want 8,000 square-foot lots and 30 percent open space, then you're communicating the outcome you want to achieve."

Arendt stated that 30 percent permanent open space may be possible in an urban area, while 60 to 80 percent open space is

possible in rural areas. Consider zoning by density rather than lot size. "A maximum lot size of 6,000-8,000 square feet is still respectable," he says. "Don't worry about minimum lot sizes. Developers will ignore those."

See for yourself

How attractive and livable a conservation design subdivision can look is hard to capture in words. That's why 1000 Friends of Minnesota asked Twin Cities Public Television to tape Randall Arendt's June talks to create two hour-long shows in a series called "Land Matters." Both segments, "Smarter Subdivision Design" and "Rethinking Main Street," are airing intermittently on TPT's Minnesota Channel. If you'd like to receive a DVD of either segment, please contact Klara Droessler at 651-312-1000.



PHOTO BY ROBERT ENGSTROM

"A development without open space is a place I hope no one has to live."

–Randall Arendt