Conservation Community principles were applied to a hypothetical site west of Bennington. Participants explored alternatives to typical acreage-style developments and suburban sprawl that rapidly claim farmland and natural areas in the Omaha metro.
The Conservation Community charrette team explored how rural lands can offer affordable, sustainable living environments that protect river corridors, natural water sheds and water resources while creating or protecting natural habitat for indigenous wildlife and conserving valuable productive land for continued farming. The study site is a square section of Northwest Douglas County bounded on the north by State Highway 36, on the east by 192nd Street, by Bennington Road on the south and State Highway 31 to the west. The charrette team included area citizens, planners, land conservation group representatives, developers and a principle property owner.

Although the property is not yet ready for development, the charrette offers a vision for this and similar properties if and when urban development encroaches. The conservation community envisioned for this hypothetical site emphasizes sustainability and preservation of the best agricultural and natural areas.

*Key elements desired for the property include:*
  * A farming operation (an organic farm currently operates on the site).
  * At least fifty percent open space integrated and interconnected with other uses.
  * A minimum density of four dwelling units per gross acre (equals approximately 2,560 units or 10,000 residents for the entire study site).
  * Mixed-use development including residential, retail and office.

*Objectives*

The team identified environmental, social/cultural, technological, economic and public policy objectives in setting up this hypothetical conservation community. Key environmental indicators included the importance of preserving contiguous “open spaces” such as natural features, organic farmland and low impact landscaping.
At least fifty percent of the overall property would be dedicated to preserving trees, creeks, slopes and other natural/topographical features. Natural areas would be enhanced through connections and extensions to other natural or open areas.

An organic farming operation integrated into the plan would be capable of feeding the intended population. Important social/cultural factors would include a diverse population and a mixed-use development (residential, retail and office blended together). Population areas would offer a variety of housing opportunities, employment potential for local residents (an environment attractive to office users), and an elementary school and other early childhood development facilities.

Technological aspects of the site include the use of appropriate organic, sustainable agricultural practices, renewable energy resources and LEED green building/design practices.

To be successful, the prospective developer would need to utilize portions of the open space for alternative energy generation (i.e. wind), ensure that the farm is well maintained and attractive, integrate a learning component in the farm and in a community garden, and provide for transit alternatives. Overall, the conduct of the farm and garden operations and their connection to the resident population would serve as important learning tools in modeling a food-based community.

Economic indicators for the site include diverse housing choices, a local outlet for farm products, and a cost-effective tax strategy. Housing units (single and multi family in a range of price options), arranged in clusters near retail and other uses, would be desirable for their mixed use convenience and “town square” aesthetic.

Mixed-use development would enable lower-cost construction and a greater variety of choice within a smaller area. It is important to insure that open space be maintained as lower taxed property.

Flexible zoning and public participation were identified as keys to success of the project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Creation of a comprehensive plan with Intent and Principles.
- Environmental protection identified as a primary goal.
- Roads and other infrastructure minimized.

- Flexible distribution of housing density and mixed uses.
- Shared parking to limit permeable surfaces.
- Allow and encourage alternative energy devices and systems.
- Open up to public review guided by Intent and Principles.
Conservation community team members suggested an “eco-valley” design (top) for the rural Bennington site that would allow for continuous wildlife corridors throughout the community and a sense of connection between residents, the natural surroundings, and food systems.

Another key element in the conservation community was a walkable, pedestrian environment for mixed-use residential and commercial areas. The pedestrian environment is enhanced by close proximity and mixing of the residential and commercial areas (thereby saving more land for farming and habitat) and public commons and garden areas.
The mixed-use town center of this conservation community makes a subtle transition from town to country life by integrating natural areas and agriculture into the community. This helps foster a spirit of community by encouraging citizens to work together to conserve land, water, energy materials, and food systems while building a healthy community.

A successful integration of rural and urban emphasizes the use of sustainable, appropriate or “low-tech” methods for farming and a design that integrates existing farm structures into the community.
Environmental
• Site survey of one square mile of existing farmland for natural vegetation, landforms, waterways, and resources/designate such features as “no build” zones/designate conservation easements.
• Plans for balancing conservation strategies, mixed-use village-style clustered housing, organic farming land uses.
• Existing trees, streambanks, watersheds kept in natural state.

Socio-cultural
• Programs with the local/regional communities and markets to re-connect consumers with local food and production.
• Community and farming community linked in suburban/rural coalitions, producers/markets, community assisted agriculture.
• Common community of citizens working to conserve land, water, energy materials, and food systems.

Technological
• Sustainable, appropriate or “low-tech” methods used for farming, design of community/integrate existing farm structures.
• WIFI wireless electronics throughout the community.
• Multi-modal transportation connections to the region.

Economic
• Food production system linked to local metro markets in the restaurant, food stores, institutional, and residential sectors.
• Village-style housing development arranged with daily-needs commercial shops that are locally owned and operated.
• Micro-economic cooperatives organized among residents.

Public Policy
• Conservation Plan and Covenants for the community added as a sub-area plan to the County Comprehensive Plan.
• Appropriate sustainable & affordable relationships determined between community and county for service needs and account for advantages of green design, planning and development.
• Conservation development incentives within the County government, i.e., Tax Increment Financing, etc.