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Louisville's first conservation subdivision doesn't conserve enough, critics say

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On an old farm at the far eastern edge of Jefferson County, developer Steve Canfield wants to build a 566-house subdivision — but he promises to save much of the rolling meadows and wildflowers, natural ponds and thick ridges of tall, mature trees.

Called Catalpa Farms, it would be Louisville's first “conservation subdivision” — a new design that seeks to reduce the impact of houses and roads on the environment by clustering houses in smaller lots, while protecting large swaths of grass, trees and vegetation nearby.



By Kylene Lloyd, The Courier-Journal

Developer Steve Canfield at the site in Fisherville that could be Louisville's first conservation subdivision.

But while approved by the Metro Planning Commission last month, Canfield's plan for 190 acres off Old Clark Station Road in Fisherville has received a lackluster welcome from neighbors and city officials alike.

Some worry it sets a bad precedent for future development in the Floyds Fork region — an area expected to balloon with subdivisions in the next few decades as the city builds a massive ring of parks around the creek.

“This wasn't what I expected to see for the first conservation subdivision,” said Metro Planning Commission chairwoman Sue Ernst, who described the plan as too conventional.

The commission said it had little choice but to approve the plan on July 16 because it met all the technical requirements, adopted in 2008. But Ernst described it as “conservation subdivision light,” and commission spokeswoman Connie Ewing said staff members have cited “the need to begin a review” of the Planning Commission's concerns about the conservation subdivision requirements.

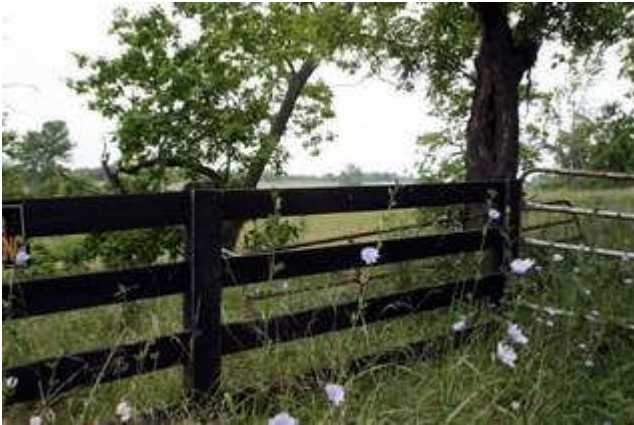
The subdivision appears to be designed “without fully considering the features of the land,” senior metro planner Steve Sizemore said in an internal staff e-mail. He complained that Canfield chose to put the highest number of houses “on some of the most sensitive and unique areas of the site.”

Canfield brushes off the criticism, saying no one knows the site or appreciates its characteristics better than he does, including the city planners.

“It’s a beautiful piece of property,” he said.

And the significance of the plan should not be overlooked, said Randall Arendt, a landscape architect who has written books advocating conservation subdivisions.

“For Louisville, it’s a big step forward,” said Arendt, who lives in Rhode Island. “You’re not going to get it the first time that it’s tried. People take time, developers in particular, to wrap their heads around a new concept.”



By Kylene Lloyd, The Courier-Journal

Many neighbors want to keep the rural character of the Fisherville area.

An idea that has taken hold primarily in the Northeast and Midwest, conservation subdivision design allows the same number of houses as a regular subdivision — or in some cases more — while preserving space and trees.

Developers save money on roads and utilities, and the park-like setting is thought to make the homes more valuable — though at first, homebuyers might not see value in having a smaller personal lot in exchange for more open space elsewhere.

That was the experience in Waukesha County, a suburb of Milwaukee, when conservation subdivisions were first built in the 1980s, said county land-use director Dale Shaver.

Eventually, however, the idea took hold, and now about half of the new subdivision proposals in the county use conservation design.

“The public support jumps when they see it play out,” Shaver said.

To get a conservation subdivision in Louisville, developers are required to identify features worth saving, like ponds, streams and hedgerows, and set aside at least 30 percent of the total site for permanent conservation. Canfield’s conservation area amounts to 42 percent.

Sonja Ridge, a developer who lives in Fisherville, said Canfield’s plan simply calls for too much building on such a remote site. Labeling such a plan “conservation” is “a joke,” she said.

But on a recent tour, Canfield and his development company president, Mike Jones, pointed out row after row of mature trees that will be saved for houses to back up to, ponds that will become focal points and grassy areas that will be left unbuilt. One might become a disc-golf course.

Overall, 77 percent of the tree canopy on the site will be saved, Jones said, while Canfield would be required to save 15 percent, at most, if it were a conventional subdivision.

The site, which nearly touches Shelby County, is served by substandard rural roads, and Canfield will have to spend about \$500,000 improving them. He will also have to extend a sewer trunk line from an adjacent subdivision he's building. Jones declined to say how much that will cost.

Canfield added that if he weren't the one to bring sewers to the area, someone else eventually would, and the land would be developed without the same sensitivity.

Canfield, who formed his development company in 1985, has made a name for himself building mansion-like houses off Wolf Pen Branch Road near Prospect. Both of the sites for this year's Homearama, where houses start at about \$500,000, are Canfield subdivisions.

But with the ability to fit lots into smaller spaces, Canfield said he wants to offer houses as low as \$150,000 in Catalpa Farms, achieving the housing diversity that Louisville officials often encourage.

Yet, the subdivision might also illustrate the unique challenge Louisville has with conservation planning.

In other communities with conservation subdivisions, developers aren't automatically allowed as many houses per acre as they are in Louisville, said Sizemore, the metro planner. Jefferson County's "default" zoning for rural land — allowing almost five houses per acre — dates to the 1940s, he said in an interview.

Though Canfield's plan is well below the maximum number of houses allowed, "we still feel there may be too many units put into this plan," Sizemore said in his internal memo.

Jones counters that without 566 homes, Canfield would not be able to offer houses under \$200,000, nor afford to leave 42 percent of the site undeveloped. And he added that some lots will likely be eliminated as the development proceeds.

More conservation subdivision plans could be on the way, including another Canfield subdivision that could be redesigned, and developer Marty Hoehler's plan for about 1,100 houses nearby in Fisherville.

Steve Porter, a lawyer who fought Canfield's plan on behalf of some Fisherville residents, worries the city will be forced to accept more plans it doesn't like.

But as Canfield's lawyer reminded the Planning Commission, nothing stops him from clearing and building the same number of houses in a typical subdivision.

Canfield admits that, if he lived next door to the old farm, he wouldn't want to see it developed either. But if it's going to be built by anyone, "I would want it to be me."

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