Conservation Subdivision Survey

Data Collection: Erica Christoph, Kenna Hall, Amy Salley

Data Compilation and Paper: Kenna Hall

Abstract:

This project's members compiled descriptive data on new conservation subdivisions in Georgia and prepared a report updating information from a survey completed several years ago. Members compiled a list of developers of conservation subdivisions and telephoned them asking them to participate in the survey. Members then wrote survey questions and either mailed, e-mailed, or faxed them to the developers. Kenna then compiled this data and statistically analyzed it.

The purpose of the project is to show the costs and benefits of building a conservation subdivision. The members seek to learn whether the savings on infrastructure because of the clustering of the houses balances with or outweighs the costs of obtaining permits to cluster homes. Members expect to learn whether it is more or less expensive to build a conservation subdivision in an area where there is a Conservation Subdivision Ordinance allowing the clustering of homes. The group's main client is the River Basin Center because the Ecology department gets many requests from local governments and developers every year for data on conservation subdivisions. The group expects to learn the feasibility of constructing conservation subdivisions with this survey and analysis.

The final project is an executive summary followed by an analysis of each conservation subdivision complete with statistical data, information on the use of the greenspace, and waste management information.

Names of Developers:

The group, Erica Christoph, Kenna Hall, and Amy Salley, attempted to get developer contact information by calling various county planning departments. Kenna contacted Cobb County planning
department and was passed around from person to person until she left a message for someone who never returned her call. Erica was the most successful person in getting developer contact information. She was able to obtain Cherokee County’s full list of conservation subdivision developers and their phone numbers. Because of this information, most of our conservation subdivision surveys come from Cherokee County. Cobb County eventually provided us with a list of developments, but the “developers” were only listed as LLC’s and no phone numbers were available when we tried to look up the LLC's in the phone book. Erica was in the middle of attempting to contact someone from the Gwinnett County planning department when the semester ended.

Overall, the most difficult part of this project was obtaining developer contact information. I might recommend to a future student taking on this project to visit the county planning departments in person to get the information that is needed. It seems to be very difficult for the planning departments to generate a list of conservation subdivisions and their developer contact persons and phone numbers. There is no existing database that lists all the conservation subdivisions in Georgia and their developers.

Surveys:

The survey was written by Erica Christoph and was based on a similar survey written by another student who worked on this project previously. The major differences between the 2006 survey and the old survey was that the 2006 surveys contained the following items and the old survey did not:

1. The 2006 surveys asked whether the subdivisions were on septic or sewer, and asked follow-up questions about maintenance of community septic systems if applicable.
2. The 2006 surveys were divided into 2 pages: page 1 was subdivision specific and had to be answered separately for each subdivision, and page 2 was general questions for all the developer's conservation subdivisions.
3. The 2006 surveys asked whether the subdivision had won any awards.
There were some problems with the way the survey was written. First of all, the survey did not ask which county the subdivision was constructed in, so the question, “Is there a conservation subdivision ordinance in your jurisdiction?” made little sense because the jurisdiction was unknown for many of the subdivisions. Another problem was that there was no blank after “Greenspace Acreage” on the first page, so some developers failed to put their greenspace acreage and instead just answered the questions below “Greenspace Acreage” because it looked more like a heading than a question. Also, the survey did not ask what the greenspace was used for, nor did it ask who held the conservation easement. This would have been interesting and helpful information. Other problems included the “yes” and “no” check boxes not lining up with their respective questions, and on the second page, the directions failed to mention, “Please specify subdivision if applicable,” on questions such as, “Have you won any awards for this subdivision?” On some surveys, developers answered that question with the name of the award and did not mention which development won the award. Other developers simply answered “yes” without providing the name of the award.

There were also problems with the response rate to the surveys. Each student in the group was given about 20 developers to contact, and out of that twenty, Kenna received 7 surveys, Amy received 3, and Erica received 1. It is unknown why the response rates were so low, but trouble with developers not returning phone calls was a major factor.

**General Analysis of Surveys**

**Statistics:**

- The subdivision with the largest total acreage was Bridgemill in Cherokee County with 1,674 acres. The second largest was Centerville in Leon County Florida with 975 acres.
- The smallest subdivision with regards to total acreage was Shadycrest with 16 acres total.
- The subdivision with the largest amount of greenspace was Centerville with 680 acres
protected. Second largest was Bridgemill with 450 acres protected.

- The subdivisions with the largest percentage of greenspace protected were Serenbe, Kenwood, and Centerville, all three with 70% protected. The next largest are The Magnolias and Rosebury both with an estimated 50% protected.

- The subdivision with the smallest average lot size was Shadycrest with 6,000 square foot lot sizes. The next highest was Serenbe with 8,712 square foot lot sizes.

- The subdivision with the largest average lot size was Kenwood with an average 5 acre lot size. The next largest was Centerville with an average lot size of 1.5 acres.

- The subdivision with the largest number of homes was Bridgemill with 2,648 homes.

- The subdivision with the smallest number of homes was Kenwood with 15 homes.

- The subdivision with the most expensive homes was Bridgemill with homes priced as high as $1 million. The second most expensive homes were in Serenbe and Kenwood (both up to $900,000) and Arbor Green (up to $925,000)

- The subdivisions with the cheapest homes were Centerville and Bridgemill with homes as low as $175,000. The second cheapest homes are in The Magnolias where homes are as low as $180,000.

- Homes sold the fastest in Bridgemill where they were only on the market an average of 3 months.

- Homes sold the slowest in Rosebury where they were on the market for about 4 years (the developer reported this to be a factor of 9/11).

- In all developments that reported to be on septic, the septic was separate. About half the developments surveyed were on septic. These developments were Centerville, Arbor Green, Copper Hills, Rosebury, and Kenwood.
• In Serenbe, the developer used constructed wetlands and a sand filter instead of septic or sewer. The drainfield was in the greenspace and the maintenance was billed monthly to the residents by the home owner’s association.

• Most developers reported that there were no infrastructure savings in the subdivisions. This could be because they did not understand the question or because the infrastructure savings were spent on other tasks like preserving trees and building trails for the greenspace (see Serenbe).

• The most common demographic in the subdivisions was “families.” Other common demographics were “childless couples” and “empty-nesters.”

Analysis of General Questions:

1. Cost of Receiving Approval

In subdivisions with a conservation subdivision ordinance in place at the time of development, most developers (four out of six) responded that it was not difficult to receive approval to build a conservation subdivision simply because of the fact that the subdivision was conservation. Specifically, Richard Thomson stated that the project was easy when done in conjunction with a $6 million road-improvement project in Cherokee County. Steve Nygren stated that the project took time to get approval, but that it was not difficult. Michael Gaskins was lucky enough to have the land already zoned for a conservation subdivision, but he added that in Cherokee County, in order to have land zoning changed from agricultural to residential, a developer must follow conservation subdivision guidelines. Curt Swilley said the zoning process was the same as in a regular development (he operated in a jurisdiction with a conservation subdivision ordinance), and Bob Meyer stated that it was difficult receiving approval for the project because Environmental Health threw up road blocks.

In subdivisions without a conservation subdivision ordinance, both developers surveyed said their projects were costly and difficult when it came to receiving approval. Rick Porter\(^1\) specifically

\(^1\) Please note that Rick Porter supplied us with 3 conservation subdivisions: Kenwood, Apalachee Heritage, and
stated that it was difficult to manipulate archaic rules to fit his developments.

2. Marketing

In subdivisions with and without a conservation subdivision ordinance, six out of eight developers marketed their subdivisions to the public as “conservation subdivisions.” The ordinance seemed to have little effect on whether the developers marketed the subdivision as “conservation.” Some of the elements emphasized to buyers by Steve Nygren, Bob Meyer, Sam McCullough, Rick Porter, John Kohler and Bob Watts were trails, abundance of greenspace and wooded areas, privacy because of the perception of larger lots due to the greenspace, and protection of natural areas. Bob Watts specifically stated that only 9 out of 51 of his homes backed up to other lots, the rest backed up to his open space giving added privacy and a feeling of larger lot sizes. He also stated that although his lots were smaller than average, his lot widths were as large as a regular development. Sam McCullough agreed with Bob Watts about the larger-feeling lots and added that he emphasized privacy and trails as benefits to his development. Bob Meyer added that he emphasized feeling good about living in the subdivision was important to buyers; protecting nature, and an abundance of natural wooded areas were also emphasized by Mr. Meyer. Rick Porter emphasized predictability and access to nature, and John Kohler emphasized the beauty of the land.

The developers who did not market their subdivisions as “conservation subdivisions” emphasized amenities, large lot sizes, way of life, and common areas. These developers were Richard Thomson, Curt Swilley, and Michael Gaskins.

3. Benefits of a Conservation Subdivision

In subdivisions without a conservation subdivision ordinance, the developers were more likely to cite protecting open space for the future as a benefit of a conservation subdivision than the

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Shadycrest. Because both Apalachee Heritage and Kenwood were built before a conservation subdivision ordinance was in place in Gwinnett county, Rick Porter's answers to page 2 “General Questions” are considered to be for subdivisions without a conservation subdivision ordinance unless otherwise specified.
developers with a conservation subdivision ordinance. Developers with a conservation subdivision ordinance were more likely to cite cost savings and privacy as benefits. Curt Swilley, Bob Watts, and Sam McCullough all cited cost savings as important. Bob Meyer's interesting response to this questions was simply, “perception.” Some developers with a conservation subdivision ordinance cited saving greenspace and protecting the environment as benefits; these developers were Richard Thomson, Steve Nygren, and Bob Watts.

4. Which Developments Sell Faster?

Richard Thomson and Michael Gaskins agreed that large master-planned subdivision properties sell faster because of the increased land values. Bob Meyer, Sam McCullough and Michael Gaskins said that lower-priced homes with smaller lots sold the best. Curt Swilley, Michael Gaskins, and Rick Porter all said quality amenities helped properties sell faster. Rick Porter added that the public does not value greenspace over quality amenities. Bob Watts stated that location, demographics, and existing home values all determine whether a property will sell fast.

5. Turnover Rate

Three out of the five developers who answered this question stated that the turnover rate was lower in conservation subdivisions because of higher home values. Michael Gaskins added that homes in conservation subdivisions are typically people's last homes before retirement, so they tend to stay longer. Bob Meyer and Rick Porter thought there was no difference, and John Kohler thought the turnover rate was higher in conservation subdivisions but did not state why he thought this. It is possible that the question was poorly-worded and he did not understand what was being asked. Sam McCullough stated that he did not know the answer. Several other developers simply did not answer this question.

6. Awards
Rick Porter has won the Gwinnett Clean and Beautiful Award for one of his developments, but he did not specify which one. Richard Thomson's Bridgemill won an award also, but Mr. Thomson did not specify the award.

Specific Analysis of Individual Subdivisions (Please see charts in the appendix)

Apalachee Heritage

This subdivision was developed by Richport Properties, and the developer contacts are Rick Porter and Lee Williams. P.O. Box 427 Tucker, GA 30065-0427. (770) 934-0710. The greenspace in this subdivision is 85 acres out of a total of 232 acres in the development (37%). A conservation easement was not required by the county, but one was placed on the greenspace anyway. The average lot size is 11,000 square feet, there are 420 homes in the development, and the selling prices of the homes range from $190,000 to $300,000. The community averaged approximately 7 home sales per month. There was no conservation subdivision ordinance in place at the time of the development of Apalachee Heritage. The subdivision is on sewer. There were no infrastructure savings on this development, and the demographics are singles, childless couples, families, and empty-nesters.

Shadycrest

This subdivision was developed by Richport Properties, and the developer contacts are Rick Porter and Lee Williams. P.O. Box 427 Tucker, GA 30065-0427. (770) 934-0710. There are 6 greenspace acres preserved out of the total 16 acres in the development (38%). There was no conservation easement required by the jurisdiction, but one was placed anyway. The average lot size is 6,000 square feet and there are 47 homes that range from $210,000 to $260,000. The community averaged five home sales per month. There was a conservation subdivision ordinance at the time of this development. The subdivision is on sewer and there were no infrastructure savings. The demographics are singles, childless couples, and families.
Kenwood

This subdivision was developed by Richport Properties, and the developer contact is Rick Porter. P.O. Box 427 Tucker, GA 30065-0427. (770) 934-0710. There are 290 protected acres out of 410 total in Kenwood, and although an easement is not required by the jurisdiction, one was placed on the greenspace anyway. This subdivision has larger lot sizes than Rick Porter's other two subdivisions: an average of five acres per lot. There are fifteen homes in the development that sell for between $600,000 and $900,000. The lots stayed on the market for 1-2 years. This subdivision was built in a jurisdiction without a conservation subdivision ordinance, and it is on separate septic. There were no infrastructure savings, and the demographics are families and empty-nesters.

Arbor Green

This subdivision was built by Ultima Holdings, and the developer is Bob Meyer, 270 Carpenter Drive Suite 200, Atlanta, GA 30328. (678) 325-2004. bobm@ultima-atl.com. There are 18.26 acres preserved out of 58.26 acres total. There was a conservation easement required by the jurisdiction and one was placed on the greenspace. The average lot size for the 29 homes in Arbor Green is 34,578 square feet (1 acre = 43,560 square feet). The homes ranged in selling price from $450,000 to $925,000 and stayed on the market an average of 18 months. There is a conservation subdivision ordinance in this jurisdiction and the subdivision is on separate septic. There were no reported infrastructure savings, and the demographics are families.

Copper Hills

Copper Hills was developed by Stone Street Investments, LLC and the contact person is J. Michael Gaskins, P.O. Box N Marietta, GA 30061. (770) 364-9771. jmgaskins@bellsouth.net. This subdivision has 17 acres of greenspace out of 142 total acres (12%). An easement is not required on the greenspace, but one was placed anyway. The average lot size is 1.1 acres and there are 97 homes in the development that range in selling price from $239,000-$439,000. The lots stay on the market an average
of 6-8 months and there is a conservation subdivision ordinance in the jurisdiction. The houses are on separate septic and there were no reported infrastructure savings. The demographics are singles, childless couples, families, empty nesters, retirees, and investment properties.

**Centerville**

Centerville was built by Conservation Community Group, LLC. in Leon County, Florida and the contact person is Jon Kohler. 8240 Centerville Rd, Tallahassee, FL 32309. (850) 907-2076. JonKohler@earthlink.net. Centerville protects 680 acres out of 975 total (70%). Centerville was built before the jurisdiction had a conservation subdivision ordinance or a requirement for an easement on the greenspace, so there is no easement on the greenspace. Based on Centerville, there is now a conservation subdivision ordinance in the jurisdiction. The average lot size is 1.5 acres and there are 200 houses in the development priced from $175,000 to $550,000. It is unknown how long the lots stayed on the market. The subdivision is on separate septic and there were no infrastructure savings. The demographics are families and investment properties.

**Bridgemill**

This subdivision was built by Bridgemill LLC and the contact persons are Don Davis and Richard Thompson, 3440 Sixes Road, Canton, GA 30114. (770) 345-1112. There are 450 acres protected out of the 1,674 acres in the development. The average lot size is 15,000 square feet and there are 2,648 homes in the subdivision that range in price from $175,000 to over $1 million. The lots stay on the market for about 3 months. There is a conservation subdivision ordinance in the jurisdiction and an easement is required for the greenspace. Bridgemill is on sewer and there were no reported infrastructure savings. Demographics include a wide range of people: singles, childless couples, families, empty-nesters, retirees, 2nd homes, and investment properties. Richard Thompson has also won awards for Bridgemill.
The Magnolias

This development was constructed by Water Tank 35, LLC and the contact person is Curt Swilley, 6185 Crooked Creek Road Norcross, GA 30092, (404) 569-5904, swilley@flash.net. About 17 acres (determined by formula – see appendix) are protected out of the total 35 acres, but there is no easement required on the greenspace, so there was no easement placed. The average lot size is 10,000 square feet and there are 76 houses ranging from $180,000 to $230,000. The community averaged four home sales per month. There is a conservation subdivision ordinance in the jurisdiction and the subdivision is on sewer. There were no reported infrastructure savings, and the demographics are childless couples, families, and empty-nesters.

Fernwood Creek

This subdivision was developed by Ransom Development and the contact person is Bob Watts, 3655 Brookside Parkway Suite 250 Alpharetta, GA (770) 616-3126; gallanthrs1@aol.com. Fernwood Creek has a total of 29.7 acres of land with 51 houses priced at $500,000 and up. There are 9.7 acres of open space (32.89%) and 2 acres in the floodplain (7%) making a total of 11.7 acres of greenspace (40%). Cherokee County, for this subdivision, referred to the open space as an undisturbed buffer along the periphery of the property where it adjoins an R-40 zoning area (this answer was in response to the question regarding easements and whether they were required for the greenspace). The average lot size for this R-20 zoned conservation subdivision was 14,800 square feet with a minimum lot size of 10,000 square feet. Mr. Watts explained in the survey that if the subdivision had been zoned differently, the minimum lot size would have been 20,000 square feet. The lots stay on the market for a length of time that is related to the lot size. There is a conservation subdivision ordinance in the jurisdiction (Cherokee County) and the subdivision is on sewer. There were reported infrastructure savings. Mr. Watts explained that because of the increased density of the subdivision, the lower the cost per length
of street which lowers the cost per lot. Mr. Watts stated that if the land was not zoned R-20 (conservation subdivision), he only could have built 34 lots for the same infrastructure costs. This would have made the subdivision out of his price range and it would not have been built. The demographics of the subdivision are families.

Serenbe

This subdivision was developed by Serenbe LLC, and the contact person is Steve Nygren, 10950 Hutcheson Ferry Road, Palmetto, GA 30268; (770) 463-2609 steve@serenbe.com. There are 300 acres protected out of the total 424 acres (70%) and there is an easement required by the jurisdiction. The Serenbe Institute Land Trust holds the current easement, but they are moving the easement to Chattahoochee Hill Country Trust when it is established. The average lot size is 0.2 acres (8,712 square feet) with 500 houses that range in selling price from $300,000 to $900,000. All houses were sold by the completion of construction. There is a conservation subdivision ordinance in the jurisdiction. The community is on constructed wetlands and sand filter. The drain field is located in the greenspace, and the home owners' association bills the houses monthly for the wetland. The infrastructure savings were converted into quality of life issues such as working to save older trees so they did not have to buy nursery trees, built more trails so they had to build fewer roads, more landscaping was used instead of lawns, and more retaining walls were used instead of mass grading. Demographics include singles, childless couples, families, empty-nesters, 2nd homes, and investment properties.

Rosebury

This subdivision was built by Land Sellutions; the contact person is Sam McCullough, 4545 Park Woods Circle Suite C Alpharetta, GA 30005, (770) 777-7731, sam@landsellutions.com. This particular developer did not fill the survey out completely. The total acreage is about 100 acres. The greenspace was deeded to the home owners’ association. The average lot size is 1 acre and there are 49
houses (Based on these numbers, there might be about 51 acres of greenspace in this subdivision or about 50%). The homes are priced between $300,000 and $400,000. Mr. McCullough stated that the houses sold slowly due to 9/11 and stayed on the market about 4 years. Cherokee County does have a conservation subdivision ordinance. Rosebury is on septic and it is separate. There were infrastructure savings due to fewer streets constructed, but Mr. McCullough did not state exactly how much the savings were. The demographics are families and empty-nesters.

Recommended Next Steps

To any future student seeking to take on this project, be warned: this project is very difficult although it does not seem difficult at first. It is not easy to find out which subdivisions in Georgia are considered “conservation” and it is even harder to determine the developer of the subdivision and the developer's contact information. Developers seem hesitant to return phone calls from people claiming to be conducting a survey. I would recommend emphasizing in your initial conversation with the developer that you are a student doing a project on conservation subdivisions instead of a person doing a survey. Do not say anything about the School of Law because they start wondering if they are being sued. Make it sound like you love developers and anything they touch will turn to gold. They will be much happier to participate if they think they are one of the only people in the world that will help you with this project. I also found it helpful to mention where you got their name and phone number. Also, give developers plenty of time to respond to your survey, but know that if the developer does not return the survey in about a week, he has either lost the survey, or decided not to participate. Most of the developers that I spoke with returned my survey within a couple of days. Also remember that good phone manners go a long way: say “sir” when speaking to a male developer, and say “please” and “thank you.” I also recommend that you have a fax machine handy to send your surveys to developers and receive them back – it is possible that some of the surveys got lost because we were sending and
receiving faxes through the law school.

The next big step I would recommend for this project is to broaden the horizon and try to include counties other than Gwinnett and Cherokee in the survey. The only way my group could think to get developer contact information was to call the county planning departments and ask. There might be a better way, but we could not find it. If the county planners are unwilling or unable to help you, then the information just is not available.

It might be a good idea also to develop a map of the conservation subdivisions in this survey. Another possible future project is to look at the conservation subdivision ordinances in the various counties (especially Cobb because there was a recent moratorium on conservation subdivisions there) and see if the greenspace is providing the benefits stated in the ordinance.
APPENDIX A: SUPPORTING GRAPHS
APPENDIX B: SURVEYS
APPENDIX C: OTHER DATA