

Quality of Place Matters in Picturesque Maine

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by Fred Snow

Quality of place matters. Maine's unique quality of place underpins our economy and our prospects for prosperity, according to economists. Quality of place includes things such as: picturesque villages; downtowns with cultural features such as museums, galleries and restaurants; and scenic rural character, with open spaces, historic farms, forests and clear lakes and streams. Value is added when recreational trails link villages and downtowns to rural areas.

Quality of place is an essential source of income and jobs. Scenic rural character supplies open spaces for existing and future farms and working forests, as well as wildlife habitat. Fields and forests keep lakes and streams clean by slowing and filtering dirty runoff.

The 2007 Census of Agriculture by the U. S. Department of Agriculture indicated that Maine's farms are increasing in number. Farms and food processors provide more than 65,000 jobs and annually contribute \$1.2 billion to Maine's economy.

Economic studies show that lake use depends on clean water and pours \$1.8 billion into the state's economy every year while supporting more than 52,000 jobs. A 2006 state Planning Office study found that wildlife-related activity brought more than \$1 billion into Maine that year.

Scenic rural character draws tourists. The same study showed that tourism is Maine's largest industry, with \$10 billion in sales of goods and services, 140,000 jobs and \$3 billion in earnings. Economists also have found that quality of place attracts and helps retain skilled and creative workers and entrepreneurs needed for today's growth industries, such as professional services and technology.

The Brookings Institution's 2006 report, "Charting Maine's Future," asserted that Maine's quality of place is under threat, diminishing future economic prospects. Many lakes in Maine have been included on a Maine Department of Environmental Protection list of lakes at risk from new development. Research shows that as water quality drops, recreational use and shoreland property values diminish, which harms local and regional economies.

LOSS OF FARMLAND

An additional concern includes the loss of farmland. Homes are spreading across rural areas in ways that degrade wildlife habitat and fragment scenic working landscapes. Historic buildings and sites in villages and downtowns, as well as in rural areas, are being lost.

Protection of these and other quality of place assets does not happen by chance, and their deterioration or destruction occurs when planning tools are absent or inadequate. Most municipalities, when developing or updating comprehensive plans, conduct local attitude surveys about land use.

Almost invariably, survey results show large majorities want to protect the quality of place assets described above. Most communities intending to protect rural character respond solely with two- or three-acre minimum lot size requirements in rural areas. Some allow cluster development without siting standards. These planning tools, in spite of good intentions, lead to sprawl and a loss of rural character.

In recognition of the importance of quality of place, the Kennebec Valley Council of Governments (KVCOG) initiated a state Planning Office-funded project in 2008 to develop planning tools that would accommodate development while protecting quality of place. KVCOG developed a model open space subdivision ordinance and a model telecommunications tower ordinance that meet this objective.

KVCOG also completed a model ordinance on low-impact development in the Shoreland Zone for the Kennebec County Soil and Water Conservation District. In preparation for a follow-up project providing outreach about quality of place and two of these model ordinances, KVCOG contacted municipal planners in communities known to have cluster subdivisions and asked for good examples of subdivisions sensitive to quality of place. Site visits to several of these developments revealed two outstanding examples in Freeport, which will be described in this article, and a good example in each of the following towns: Bremen (affordable housing); Brunswick; Kennebunk; and York.

THREE CHARACTERISTICS

An open space subdivision can be defined as a tract of land subdivided into the same or similar number of lots as a conventional subdivision, but arranged with lots of reduced dimensions that, when possible, are blended into the landscape, with remaining area of the tract protected as open space. Such a subdivision can protect quality of place in rural areas if it has three primary characteristics:

- As indicated in the definition, the development blends into the natural landscape when possible.

- Significant natural features such as open fields, important wildlife habitat, prime agricultural soils, scenic views of and from the property, wetlands and steep slopes and cultural features such as stone walls, existing historic structures, etc. These are identified and incorporated into protected open space when possible.
- At least 60 percent of the parcel is permanently protected open space.

The town of Freeport, concerned about protecting quality of place in its rural areas, adopted an Open Space Subdivision Ordinance in 2002 that requires either open space subdivisions or estate subdivisions with lots of no less than 10 acres in rural districts.

Mill Stream Subdivision, the first development approved under the ordinance, is an outstanding example of an open space subdivision that protects quality of place. Most houses sited within an existing tree farm along the edge of large fields blend into the landscape when viewed from Pleasant Hill Road. Most houses are buffered from neighboring lots by trees. Of the total 117-acre parcel, 72 acres were set aside as protected open space. Thirty-one house lots were allowed on the remainder, the same number of lots that would have been allowed for a conventional subdivision.

Mitchell Ledge Farm Subdivision is another outstanding example of a development in Freeport that protects open space. The original parcel size of Mitchell Ledge Farm, which is still a working farm, was about 183 acres. The Freeport Conservation Trust raised funds to purchase and manage an agricultural and conservation easement on 105 acres of the parcel, which includes the farm. Sixty-two acres were developed as an open space subdivision, with 42 acres of protected open space and 20 acres consisting of 15 one-acre lots and a road. House lots are in a wooded area and mostly can't be seen from public roads. Agriculture and forest management are allowed on protected land of the farm and subdivision.



Open space subdivisions can provide economic, environmental and social benefits to a community as well as advantages for developers. Site development costs are decreased by designing with the terrain, with less site work for narrower roads and common driveways. With less road surface and other infrastructure, municipal maintenance costs are also reduced.

Valuable amenities are added such as permanent scenic views and trails. Those raise real estate sale values and enhance marketing. The municipality can protect farmland, wildlife habitat and lake watersheds while allowing the same number of lots as in a conventional subdivision.

Development costs are also reduced because acceptable design typically is established at the pre-application stage, before engineering costs are incurred. Although open space subdivisions offer many benefits, they are an essential partial answer to protecting rural quality of place. Creation and implementation of a local open space plan with identified high-value natural areas, including farmland, for protection is also essential.

MODEL ORDINANCE

KVCOG's Model Open Space Subdivision Ordinance includes a number of elements that are essential if an ordinance is to be an effective tool in protecting quality of place. Some of them are:

- Have a sketch plan that identifies and shows site constraints and opportunities and designs subdivision around these features.
- Include site design standards that locate development so it blends into the landscape and avoids identified site constraints and natural and cultural features when possible.
- Allow the same number of lots as would be allowed in a conventional subdivision.
- Mandate that subdivisions be open space subdivisions when they consist of five or more lots in rural areas. Allowing open space subdivisions as an option, even with density bonuses, has not worked.
- Set aside at least 60 percent of the parcel in addition to non-buildable areas. Researchers have found that rural character breaks down as the percentage of open space falls below 70 percent in rural areas.
- Require 75 percent of protected open space to be contiguous and linked to other blocks of open space in adjacent properties.
- Allow roads 18 feet wide and common driveways 12 feet wide.
- Permit flexibility in lot size, shape and setbacks.
- Allow passive recreation in protected open space except where it conflicts with an agricultural use.
- Include building envelopes and treed buffers on house lots.

Three central Maine communities – Litchfield, Manchester and Winslow – have open space subdivision ordinances largely based on KVCOG's model ordinance.

ONLINE RESOURCES

KVCOG's Model Open Space Subdivision Ordinance, a presentation about open-space subdivisions including slides of Maine examples, design and review and other planning tools that protect quality of place can be found at www.kvcog.org/planning.htm

***Fred Snow** is a Community Planner for Kennebec Valley Council of Governments (KVCOG) and can be reached via fws319@aol.com. He has conducted hands on workshops on how to design open space subdivisions and is the author of five model ordinances including KVCOG's Model Open Space Subdivision Ordinance and Maine's Model Wind Energy Facilities Ordinance and Guidebook.*
