

MEMORANDUM

TO: Amanda Lessard, Planner

CC: Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC)

From: Ben Smith, AICP, Community Planner, North Star Planning



RE: Overview of Cluster Subdivisions, Pros and Cons

Date: December 6, 2018

The Town Council has asked the Planning Department for more information on Cluster Subdivisions and is considering eliminating Cluster Subdivision standards from the Section 900 Subdivision Review standards in the Land Use Ordinance. This follows a September discussion with the Council where the Council forwarded LRPC recommendations to the Planning Board to make Cluster Subdivisions mandatory in the Farm and Farm Residential Zones and the subsequent negative recommendation Back from the Planning Board.

What is a Cluster Subdivision?

A Cluster Subdivision is a type of subdivision that focuses adjusting lot size and configuration around the unique natural, historic and scenic aspects of a property while setting aside a certain amount of open space within the subdivision that is permanently protected. When designed well, cluster subdivisions preserve open space and minimize environmental impacts.

Cluster Subdivision design should account for environmental features like wetlands and vernal pools, steep slopes, streams and floodplains not just as items to be deducted from the total developable area, but as features to be preserved and incorporated into an overall subdivision design. Additionally, unique property features like old stone walls, long views and scenic resources should be protected as much as possible.

Cluster Subdivisions are not about jamming more houses on a lot than would otherwise be allowed by zoning. Net residential density is calculated the same way for any subdivision, cluster or conventional. All the normal stormwater, septic, water,

traffic and other standards apply to cluster subdivisions, so these designs will not have any more impact than a different subdivision layout.

Cluster Subdivision design versus Conventional Subdivision design

Cluster Subdivision	Conventional Subdivision
Wetlands, steep slopes, streams, poorly drained soils, critical habitats and environmental communities and other environmental property features are considered integral parts of the subdivision design.	Environmental limitations are considered constraints to development.
Long views, scenic resources, and other rural elements like stone walls and orchards are integrated into subdivision design.	Scenic and other rural resources are not considered.
Open space is mandated as part of every subdivision.	No open space is provided for the benefit of the neighborhood, the town or wildlife.
Generally include shorter road lengths, reducing impervious surface area and stormwater runoff. Shorter roads are also more economical to maintain long term.	Generally require longer roads to reach all corners of the property subject to subdivision.
Homes are often grouped in one or two clusters, sometimes with no visual buffer from roads, making them seem out of place in rural settings.	Often are the dominant building type or mimic the scale and pattern of existing lot-by-lot development to provide a sense of better matching existing "rural character."

What we have learned in Windham

With all of the promised advantages of Cluster Development listed above, and all of the concern publicly expressed for environmental integrity, controlling stormwater runoff, protecting habitats and preserving rural Windham what is not to love about Cluster development?

It cannot be disputed that Windham has had a very mixed experience with Cluster Subdivisions over the last 10 or more years. Some projects have been well designed with valuable open space permanently preserved and some projects have created eyesores to longtime residents, even though the developers followed all of the rules. What can explain this?

I suggest that aside from the sheer number of homes being built in Windham that are causing concerns for people with new neighbors, **the biggest issue with Cluster Subdivision standards has been inconsistent quality of design.** This has occurred for a couple of reasons.

1. The Planning Board's inability to require project designers to use the full inventory of natural, scenic, and historic resources to shape lot layout.

Cluster Standards have long encouraged flexibility and creativity in subdivision design. However, the Board does not have a mechanism to work with developers to on what features are important to keep or highlight in a completed project. In other words, designers need to show where a stone wall or old orchard exists on the landscape, but they can't ensure those remain when the subdivision is built. They need to show the way the land elevation tails off at the back of the property and existing tree lines, but the Board can't currently require a designer to use these features to screen new homes from view. Alternatively, the Board can't ensure that a long view of a field or a view of a brook is preserved from an existing road if the designer feels it would be a good spot to put a new home.

2. Past standards have required buffers, but these buffers have been ineffective as visual buffers.

We have learned from the November community workshops on growth in rural Windham that one of the biggest issues of any kind of new subdivision development is the visual impact of that development. Perhaps the largest component of a person's perception of an area's rural character is related to what does it look like when you drive by or look out your window. Too often, new development is approved with only minimal regard for its visual impact from existing roads and homes.

Conclusions

The proposed changes to the cluster subdivision standards were forwarded as changes that would be helpful to the Planning Board and staff in regard to additional authority in regard to the design issues above.

Conventional 2-acre subdivision design is not compatible with a truly rural landscape.

There is too much habitat fragmentation, higher impacts on stormwater quality, loss of larger open spaces for rural uses like agriculture, wood lots, recreational activities that depend on access to large open areas like hiking, snowmobiling, hunting and

more when open space preservation does not happen every time there is a development in rural Windham.

Poor design has led to too many examples of Cluster Subdivisions that don't live up to the promise of all the benefits of such a design.

Neighbors and other residents don't see what they are getting with a cluster design; they see what they are losing. For example, most town residents don't know or care about the public access to acres of field and woods on both sides of Black Brook preserved as part of the Chute Road South Subdivision, they only see the 14 homes in the middle of a hayfield that were not there 10 years ago. The Board needs the ability to ensure that the best elements of developed properties are highlighted and the most impactful are minimized.

A haphazard approach to where and how Cluster Subdivisions have been proposed and approved has led to a patchwork of open space, often with limited value beyond the immediate development it is associated with.

Cluster Subdivision design approaches would be more valuable within a context of an Open Space Plan for the town that establishes priorities for the types of land to be preserved and a framework for connecting open spaces. The value of such a plan would be increased exponentially if it were part of a program of regular public acquisition and conservation to compliment the private open space creation tied to residential development.

Cluster Subdivisions are not encouraging or increasing the pace of residential development in rural Windham.

People seem to be buying homes in Windham as fast as they are built, whether they are in subdivisions or happen on a lot-by-lot basis, whether they are hidden in the woods or in the middle of a field, or whether or not they are part of a development that respects and takes advantage of the natural setting is part of.

Windham is part of a regional housing market and as such has only limited control over how to react to growth pressures and the rate of change that pressure presents. The town has much more control over how and where that growth takes place, and what parts of the town will change faster than other parts.

Cluster Subdivisions have gotten a bad rap, but don't throw away this valuable tool for design in rural areas – make it better.

Perhaps the suggestions from the LRPC don't go far enough to ensure thoughtful design and perhaps these developments should be called Open Space Subdivisions or Conservation Subdivisions, because that's the intended result of such development. If this is the case, let the LRPC consider additional changes along with the ongoing work of zoning standards for the Farm and Farm Residential zones.