

GUIDE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

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Overview

Housing and residential development are important issues in this Plan for at least two reasons. First, approximately 97 percent of Washington is zoned for residential purposes and the pace and intensity of development may fundamentally change the rural character of the community. Residential development must be guided in ways to retain as much of our rural character as possible. Second, addressing housing needs in Washington to maintain a diverse community was identified as one of the top issues by Washington residents and public officials.

This section of the Plan outlines strategies for housing and residential development in order to maintain the character of the community.

Washington Green Homes



Washington Depot Apartments



Encourage Conservation Subdivision Design

Conventional Design

A parcel of land that is divided into residential lots with little or no open space

Conservation Design

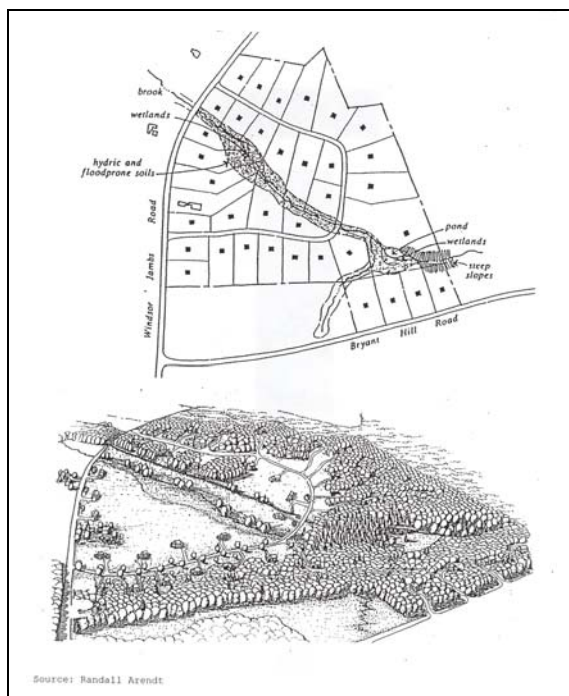
A parcel of land divided into roughly the same number of lots that are smaller in area than a conventional development and the remaining area is preserved or dedicated as open space.

The residential density regulations developed by the Zoning Commission limit the number of houses that can be built on a given parcel of land. The subdivision regulations afford design options and incentives to comply with zoning standards through conservation subdivision designs.

A conservation design plans a development to preserve up to half of the developable land as open space. Without necessarily reducing the number of developed lots, such designs are far more sensitive to the local environment and the open space goals of the community. The following graphics illustrate how open space development patterns relate better to site characteristics than conventional development patterns:

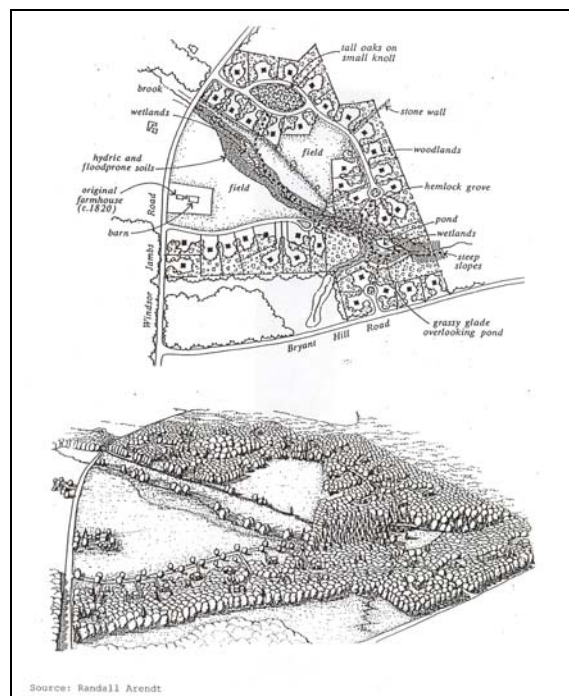
- More open space is preserved,
- The rural streetscape and scenic view is preserved, and
- Important resources (wetlands, existing trees) are preserved.

Conventional Subdivision



Randall Arendt, Conservation Design for Subdivisions

Conservation Subdivision



Zoning Regulations currently allow development flexibility to promote open space preservation. Subdivision Regulations authorize the Planning Commission to apply such standards. To ensure that these standards are appropriately applied, the commissions should review the regulations and procedures, including the pre-application review process, and adopt revisions if determined appropriate. Similarly, the commissions should determine if the regulations provide adequate flexibility to permit lot size reductions to encourage conservation designs.

Evaluate Zoning Regulations

Maintain Soil-Based Density Regulations

Washington has excellent soil-based residential density regulations which manage the intensity of residential development in the community. They should be maintained and improved as determined necessary in order to relate development intensity to the capacity of the land to handle septic leaching, stormwater run-off, water quality, and other environmental impacts.

Evaluate Revisions to Residential Zoning Regulations

Zoning standards are a valuable tool for managing development to fit the community's goal of preserving rural character. At public meetings during the planning process, residents expressed concerns about some residential development practices. This plan recommends consideration of several adjustments to zoning regulations to improve the Town's ability to ensure appropriate scale of new development.

Increased Frontage Requirements - To preserve rural character on existing arterial and collector roads, it may make sense for Washington to discourage "lotting off" along the road and encourage the development of interior parcels of land. In this way, residential development that does occur might be screened from the road and the perception of rural character maintained.

One means to accomplish this would be to consider increasing the frontage requirements for new lots on arterial and collector roads. The appropriate frontage requirement should be decided as part of the adoption process, based on circumstances specific to Washington.

Residential Bulk Regulation - In recent years, there has been a trend in some Connecticut communities towards the construction of very large houses that have the potential to be out of character with the size of the lot, the nature of the neighborhood, or the relationship to the street. There is some indication that this trend is also occurring in Washington.

In response, Washington could consider adopting a "floor-area ratio" (FAR) regulation in residential zones. The FAR regulation would relate the maximum size of the house to the size of the lot. For example, a FAR standard of 0.05 would allow 4,356 square feet of floor area on a two-acre lot (87,120 square feet). The appropriate standard would be considered in the adoption process.

Another option may be to adopt a "volume ratio" that limits the total volume of a house in relation to the size of the lot. This standard may be more desirable in Washington since it is the overall bulk (or volume) of the house, not just the floor area, that seems to be the most sensitive issue.

Density Regulations

Washington adopted soil-based residential density regulations to provide more flexibility in development patterns (as recommended in the 1993 Plan of Development) and to encourage the preservation of open space, farmland, natural resources, scenic views, and other important character resources.

Floor-Area Ratio (FAR)

Floor-area ratio (FAR) is simply the relationship between the total living area of the building relative to the area of the lot.

For example, a 3,000 square foot building on a 30,000 square foot lot would have a floor-area ratio of 0.10.

A 6,000 square foot building on a 30,000 square foot lot would have a floor-area ratio of 0.20.

How the floor area ratio would be defined in Washington would need to be determined.

Maximum Building Height - Washington's Zoning Regulations currently limit total building height to 45 feet for a principal building and 26 feet for an accessory building (from the average grade measured 6 feet from the structure). The mean height of the roof cannot exceed 35 feet (see Section 11.7 of the Zoning Regulations).

This Plan recommends that Washington consider modifying the maximum building height regulations to require a special permit for buildings that exceed a certain mean height or maximum height. This will help prevent situations where buildings exceed reasonable standards for where they are located.

Residential Setback Regulations - Another reason why some homes appear excessively large for the property or the neighborhood is where they are sited on the lot.

In the R-1 and R-3 Districts, Washington may wish to consider adopting a zoning regulation that relates the setback to the height of the structure (as is done now for cupolas, chimneys, and other portions of a building that exceed the maximum height limit). The Zoning Commission should evaluate how to modify the setback regulations as a Special Exception rather than have such waivers administered by variance.

Lake Waramaug District - As discussed in the section on Natural Resources (Page 3-4), Washington should evaluate and consider additional zoning standards in the watershed area to protect water quality. This recommendation was also included in the 1974 and 1993 Plans of Development.

Lake Waramaug



Nettleton Hollow



Promote Housing for a Diverse Community

While housing in Washington is not particularly affordable (see page 1-10), Washington is a diverse community (ages, incomes) and residents have indicated that they want it to stay that way. However, residents are also aware that the inherent desirability of the community and efforts to preserve rural character have resulted in increased housing prices that may make it harder for some existing residents to stay in, or potential residents to come to, Washington.

To address this concern, various groups in the community have participated in projects to develop more affordable family housing (Dodge Farm) and senior housing (Riverwoods). Still, the need for more diverse housing types is perceived to be greater than what these efforts have been able to accomplish. Residents want to find ways to integrate more housing options into the existing fabric of the community. Stand alone, single family homes seem to be preferred by potential buyers.

Addressing the issue of diverse housing opportunities will require additional efforts by the Town during the period covered by this Plan.

The Housing Study Committee report made the following key findings and recommendations:

1. Recognize the clear need for more affordable housing options.
2. Develop a ten-year plan to construct a minimum of 96 new affordable housing units, to result in a total of 140 affordable units including Ellsworth Apartments (7 units), Dodge Farm (14 units), Riverwoods (12 units) and the 11 units approved for the former Montessori School site in New Preston.
3. Focus on the housing needs of current and past Washington residents or workers with moderate incomes (senior citizens, low/moderate income persons, and young adults).
4. Seek funding from a variety of sources including private donations, Town funding, and state or federal grants.
5. Locate housing units wherever appropriate land is available with some priority for existing developed sites or village centers.
6. Integrate the design of the development into the neighborhood and the community.
7. Maintain regulations for attached and detached accessory apartments and consider other regulatory approaches to further the provision of affordable housing.

This Plan recommends that the Town pursue these recommendations as outlined in the following strategies.

Statutory Reference

“The Plan shall make provision for the development of housing opportunities, including opportunities for multifamily dwellings consistent with soil types, terrain and infrastructure capacity, for all residents of the municipality and the planning region.”

“The Plan shall promote housing choice and economic diversity in housing, including housing for both low and moderate income households, and encourage the development of housing which will meet the housing needs.”

CGS 8-23

Accomplishments

In addition to building 14 units at Dodge Farms and 12 units at Riverwoods, the Washington Community Housing Trust has aided 40 families of moderate income to renovate their housing under programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Other Land Options

While no community in Connecticut appears to have done this yet, Washington could consider adopting an affordable housing “set-aside” requirement (as is done for open space) where land for affordable housing must be donated to the Town or a certain percentage of units in a new development must meet affordability guidelines.

Additionally, if authorized by future legislation, the Town could allow a fee-in-lieu of affordable housing requirement to help promote the development of affordable housing in the community.

Local Involvement

To the extent feasible, the Housing Study Committee wants to develop affordable housing through private donations and municipal funding.

The primary reason is that this will give the community control over the design and siting of the project and allow the development to be tailored to the needs of current and former Washington residents and/or workers.

There is some concern that utilizing state or federal funding will create constraints on project design or development or impose requirements for occupancy by people with no connection to the community.

Pursue Housing Diversity Strategies

Developer - The preferred development entity for producing more affordable housing in Washington is a non-profit developer with strong community ties, such as the Washington Community Housing Trust. Such an entity is more likely to be sensitive to local issues related to siting and design.

Approaches directly involving the Town, such as a public/private partnership or a Town-sponsored development, would be a secondary choice since the financial and management responsibilities are not within the Town’s area of expertise. For-profit developers may be another alternative provided that the development addresses unique local needs and is designed in a way to make it compatible within the community as a whole.

Project Size - Non-profit or municipal developments should be designed to fit the location and be consistent with Washington’s character and structure. Accomplishing a series of small projects will be easier to handle than one large project, while still addressing the goal of providing diverse housing and meeting statutory affordability guidelines (CGS 8-30g).

Land Acquisition - Land costs can represent a significant portion of a development project and addressing this is an important consideration in providing for affordable housing. This Plan recommends that land donations for affordable housing be sought throughout the community. In addition, opportunities for “bargain purchase,” use of existing Town-owned property, or leasing of land for affordable housing development should be pursued.

Locations - Locations in or near Washington Depot, New Preston, and Marbledale will help support these village centers and are the preferred locations. Other locations could also be desirable based on the size and design of the proposal.

Regulations - It is difficult for Washington to adopt regulations that will govern all circumstances where an affordable housing development might be proposed. As a result, the land use commissions should recognize the need for flexibility in regulations to accommodate affordable housing projects.

Financing - Washington may encourage the development of affordable housing through the use of private donations, “sweat equity” on the part of occupants, and low-interest loans. Washington may also encourage the use of state and/or federal funding programs for affordable housing when compatible with local needs and objectives.

However, it is recognized that the most successful housing diversity strategies typically involve Town support and funding. The Housing Study Committee recommended that the Town budget \$50,000 per year for five years to provide support and funding for such projects. This Plan recommends that that funding level be maintained or increased. Creation of a “Housing Land Fund” would be an appropriate step, particularly if the State authorizes a fee-in-lieu of affordable housing for new subdivisions as discussed in the sidebar.

Promote Housing for an Aging Population

Over the next 20 years, the number of mature adults (ages 55+) in Washington is expected to increase significantly as older residents live longer and healthier lives. The housing needs of mature adults (“empty nesters”, active elderly, frail elderly) can vary from other segments of the population.

Washington already provides the following housing options that may be of specific interest to an aging population:

- residents can remain in their existing housing unit (and use Town services and receive tax relief, if qualifying),
- residents can utilize an accessory apartment (to rent out or live in themselves) to help meet their housing needs, or
- residents can relocate to the “Riverwoods” housing development (as available).

In addition, the following options are available in the general vicinity:

- residents can relocate to a condominium or rental housing here or in another community,
- residents can relocate to a congregate or assisted living facility in another community, or
- residents can relocate to a skilled nursing facility.

Washington should also consider the following strategies:

- allowing more diverse housing options (such as apartments in mixed use buildings) in village center areas,
- developing additional elderly housing developments (similar to Riverwoods) if there is demand, and
- permitting the development of more condominiums or congregate housing developments, assisted living facilities, or skilled nursing facilities in Washington through a special permit process if they are located in an appropriate location (preferably on an arterial or collector road in or near a village center) and are either constructed or converted in such a way as to be compatible with the character of the community. Zoning regulations may be expanded to ensure that such developments meet community standards.

Summary

Like many small communities, Washington faces the challenge of guiding future growth, particularly in residential development. At the same time, the Town recognizes its responsibilities and self-interests in ensuring the availability of diverse and affordable housing to accommodate changing population demographics.

Guide Housing Development – Strategies Summary

	Responsibilities*	
	Primary	Others
A. Conservation Design Subdivisions		
1. In collaboration with the Zoning Commission, review and revise subdivision regulations, if determined appropriate, to provide further guidelines and incentives to encourage conservation design subdivisions	PC	ZC
2. Review open space priorities and criteria in subdivision regulations for consistency with the results of the open space planning strategies recommended in Chapter 3 of this Plan.	PC	CC OSC
B. Zoning Regulations		
1. Continue use of soil-based zoning, monitor and refine further if necessary	ZC	
2. Review zoning regulations regarding development flexibility and determine need for revisions to further encourage conservation development designs	ZC	PC
3. Consider revisions to strengthen zoning regulations regarding road frontage, floor area, building height, setbacks, and district boundaries	ZC	
C. Housing Diversity		
1. Reconstitute the Housing Study Committee to conduct an evaluation of strategies to accomplish the goals of the Housing Study Committee report of 2002	BOS	HSC
2. Consider using a Housing Land Fund to support housing diversity goals	BOS	BOF
3. Consider adopting an affordable housing set-aside provision in the subdivision regulations along with a fee-in-lieu of affordable housing provision if authorized by future legislation	PC	
4. Consider regulation revisions to encourage housing options, such as mixed commercial/residential uses in village areas	ZC	
5. Evaluate and, if determined appropriate, develop special permit processes to allow development of more condominiums and congregate housing, assisted living facilities, or skilled nursing facilities	ZC	
6. Support public and private efforts to develop elderly and affordable housing	BOS	All

*For key to abbreviations see Page 7-4