

Responsible Residential Development and Affordable Housing in Yellow Springs

Introduction and Purpose

To explain why Conservation Development(also known as Conservation Design) principles are critical for Yellow Springs' future growth, demonstrate how it aligns with the Yellow Springs Comprehensive Plan and community values, and provide the community with benefits, models, challenges, and options for Conservation Development.

Background: Yellow Springs' Values and Growth Pressures

Yellow Springs is a community known for its natural beauty, progressive values, and commitment to environmental stewardship. As the village grows, it faces the challenge of accommodating housing while preserving the rural landscape, agricultural heritage, and natural features that define its identity.

New and emerging land development for housing has raised a number of concerns by village members. Conservation Development principles can ensure development is responsible, cost effective, and with the least disruption to rural life as possible.

This document was developed and is offered to the Yellow Springs Community from former members of the Environmental Commission as a resource for implementing changes in how property is developed in our village. A number of cities around the country are using Conservation Development principles to responsibly develop land resulting in preservation, conservation, affordable housing.

It can be done.

What Is Conservation Design?

Conservation design is a development strategy in the Ohio Balanced Growth Program¹ planning approach that:

- Clusters homes on a portion of a development parcel after preserving a conservation area
- Preserves 40–60% of the land as permanent open space
- Maintains the same total number of homes as conventional zoning
- Protects natural features, farmland, and wildlife corridors
- Uses development principles that preserve soil, responsibly manage stormwater and water retention and utilizes native plantings
- Results in lower development and maintenance costs
- One study found a strong correlation between using cluster type developments the increased preservation of wildlife habitat and biodiversity, as compared to traditional residential developments, which had less wildlife habitat and biodiversity

Why Conservation Design Matters for Yellow Springs

Aligns with Local Policy and Community Vision

- Reinforces goals of the Yellow Springs Comprehensive Plan including rural character, compact growth, and natural preservation.
- Complements strategies for “smart edges” and visual gateways around the village
- Connects open spaces: Open spaces within a development can be connected to other open spaces in the area, creating a network of protected lands that preserve wildlife corridors and enhance the overall rural character.
- Conservation design encourages identifying and protecting scenic views early in the design process to maintain the rural and natural views that define our iconic village.

- Provides wildlife habitat. One study found a strong correlation between the increase of wildlife biodiversity due to habitat preservation in cluster developments as compared to traditional residential developments, which had less wildlife.
- Protects waterways like the Little Miami River and Jacoby Creek corridors
- Supports native biodiversity and soil/water health
- Strengthens Community and Quality of Life by creating walkable green spaces alive with biodiversity and beauty
- Builds neighborhoods with enduring market value

“A gentle footprint on the land will reduce construction costs”³

Supports Sustainable Economics and Affordable Housing

Conservation Design/Cluster subdivisions:

- Reduce development costs and increase the possibility of affordable housing. “Using CD principles cost an average of \$7,000 less to produce, resulted in a 50% decrease in selling time, and had a value of 12 to 16% more as compared to lots in conventional subdivisions.”
- Reduce infrastructure costs (shorter roads, less utility extension)
- Appeals to eco-conscious buyers and long-term residents
- CD housing can reduce costs for storm water and road infrastructure, grading and site preparation¹ making it more affordable to develop, reducing costs for developers and residents

Challenges and Considerations

Zoning Constraints

- Current codes may not allow flexible clustering by right
- Requires updates to subdivision ordinances or overlay zoning

Community Perceptions

- Public may confuse clustered housing with “high density” development
- Education needed to distinguish between density and design quality

Developer Familiarity

- Some developers may lack experience with conservation layouts
- May require incentives, technical support, or design templates (however, there are many models and guidance documents available, as well as technical assistance from other communities)

Ongoing Management of Open Space

- The data on cost effectiveness states that CD developments are cheaper to maintain due to lower annual mowing and landscape maintenance needs, however, it will require a long term management plan developed by a natural resources expert or a landscaper familiar with native plantings.

Options for Open Space Management

- Village could accept dedication of open space and manage parks or trails
- Nonprofits like the Tecumseh Land Trust can hold conservation easements
- Homeowners Associations (HOAs) manage and fund the open space
- Hybrid agreements between the Village, developers, and land trusts- allows shared responsibility and specialized oversight (e.g., habitat restoration)

Recommendations for Yellow Springs and Miami Township

1. Amend zoning and subdivision codes to enable conservation and cluster subdivisions by right, without the need for waivers in growth areas
2. Educate the public and developers on the difference between smart density and sprawl
3. Incentivize conservation design through density bonuses or expedited approval

Conclusion

Conservation Design is not just about how we build—it is a tool for conservation. In Yellow Springs, that means safeguarding the land, views, and rural heritage that define the community. The principles found in OBGp provide a practical, proven way to do this while allowing thoughtful, well-designed growth. Good land use can only occur through local, township and county codes. By acting now, Yellow Springs can continue to be a model of progressive vision. We can use conservation development principles to both responsibly develop residential areas while at the same time increasing the affordability of those homes.

¹ Chapter 4, Conservation Development

² Four of the five members of the Environmental Commission resigned in June, 2025 after an extended period of attempting to move forward a Conservation Development agenda. We concluded that putting these resources in the hands of the local community had the best chance of being implemented in our community.

³ Available at: https://www.yellowsprings.gov/egov/documents/1689610494_3209.pdf. ⁴ Changing Cost Perceptions: An Analysis of Conservation Development, Illinois Conservation Foundation and Chicago Wilderness, p 7