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## With the rise of 'conservation subdivisions,' developers find green spaces make economic sense

By JANET FRANKSTON  
Atlanta Journal-Constitution Staff Writer

At dusk, Patti DeVan can look out her kitchen window and see deer searching for food along a trail behind her house. They like to eat her impatiens.

Her sons have found crayfish as big as their hands in the shoals near their property, and she supplies sunflower seeds for the tufted titmice and brown-headed nuthatches.

Forget golf courses. The hottest amenity in metro Atlanta is a backyard forest.

"It gives you the feeling of being away from everything. You're calm and not stressed out," DeVan, 44, says as she walks on the shady path, brushing spider webs away from her face. "You should hear it at night. It's like a chorus."

Earlier this year, DeVan and her family packed up their home near the Mall of Georgia in Gwinnett for a new one at Orange Shoals. The subdivision, off Ga. 20 in east Cherokee County, provides 100 acres of open land for her boys, 11-year-old John and 13-year-old Ben, to explore.

Developers have discovered that many home buyers are looking for neighborhoods with swaths of trees and green space. Through a zoning category fairly new to metro Atlanta called the "conservation subdivision," they're creating



FRANK NIEMEIR / AJC  
The DeVan family (from left) Ben, 13, Paul, John, 11, and Patti moved from the Mall of Georgia area to the Orange Shoals 'conservation subdivision' in Cherokee County.

### YOUR TURN

How much nature do you need at your house or apartment?

- A balcony with a plant. 9% 117
- A shady patio. 3% 32
- Small yard. 17% 214
- Nearby park or green space. 5% 68
- Big yard. 10% 129
- I want to be surrounded by woods or fields. 55% 693



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communities with forests, some as big as public parks.

Cherokee, Gwinnett, Cobb and Forsyth counties have passed ordinances to allow for these types of projects, and officials in Fulton, DeKalb and Douglas are working on them. In Cherokee, the county leading the trend, developers were approved to build, under conservation subdivision guidelines, in 13 of 43 residential rezonings since 2000.

Generally, the guidelines allow developers to build on smaller lots if land is set aside for green space. If traditional residential zoning calls for one-home-per-acre developments, a conservation subdivision allows a developer to build the same number of homes on half-acre lots if he leaves the other half of the land undeveloped.

Builders reduce expenses by cutting down fewer trees, grading less land and in some cases building fewer roads because homes are clustered closer together on smaller lots. They also have less water and sewer piping to run through the development. The trend toward conservation subdivisions addresses not only home-buyer preference but also metro Atlanta's impending water crisis.

As more and more land in the Atlanta area is developed, pastures and forests are replaced with parking lots, driveways, streets and other impervious surfaces. This leads to storm water runoff -- what environmental authorities call a primary source of water pollution. Conservation subdivisions set aside a natural environment allowing storm water to seep into the ground instead of sweeping over roads and parking lots picking up pollutants that end up in area streams.

If the conservation subdivision is used effectively, undisturbed land can store floodwaters, buffer streams and maintain habitats for animals, says Laurie Fowler, a law professor at the University of Georgia who runs the university's Institute of Ecology. "Many developers have recognized that [green space] was marketable a long time ago."

Randall Arendt, a national expert on conservation issues, agrees this trend provides environmental benefits and gives developers an edge over those building subdivisions without open space.

"They're providing something more than simply a house, lot and a street, which is all most counties have required in the past," says Arendt, a Rhode Island-based consultant who has written three books on the subject. "There's more to life than house, lots, drains and streets, and people are starting to realize that."

Ryan Sullivan is building seven conservation subdivisions in Gwinnett County, which passed the ordinance last year. His developments in southeastern Gwinnett

**TOTAL VOTES**

1253

**Vote**

This survey is not a scientific sampling and does not reflect the opinion of the general public, but only of those who choose to participate.



RICH ADDICKS / AJC  
Four homes have been sold so far in Haynes Creek Trace, a 25-acre development in Snellville that will have 49 homes and 13.2 acres of undisturbed land.

...and prices for these subdivisions are expected to range from the \$130,000s to the \$150,000s.

"We impact less of the land in the process, while setting aside a large portion of open space," says Sullivan, development manager of York Development Inc. The economics make conservation subdivisions attractive. "If numbers didn't work, I wouldn't do it," he says.

### **No more clear-cutting trees**

It doesn't hurt that the public seems to like these projects.

"It gives us a little bit better name in the community," he says. "There is a stigma with developing, the eradication of all the trees. Here I'm trying to show we developers are willing to work with the overall community and do our part to preserve the trees."

As he walks around Haynes Creek Trace in Snellville, workmen pour concrete for driveways. Four homes have already been sold in the 25-acre development, planned for 49 homes and 13.2 acres of undisturbed land. Unlike the more upscale conservation projects around the region, this green space won't provide hiking trails. Sullivan says that could come with larger subdivisions.

"We're thinking about that," he says. "All this is new to us too. We're trying to feel out what people want."

### **A different approach**

Orange Shoals, where the DeVans live, isn't officially classified a conservation subdivision because developers started building it before the ordinance was created in 1998. The project inspired Cherokee County officials to create one.

Developer Chaunkee Venable didn't like the subdivisions that began to sprout in Cherokee in the early and mid-'90s. He says he didn't like the density and the lack of green space and concern for the environment. "I really didn't like anything about them," he says.

He came up with a different approach for Orange Shoals, where each lot backs up to green space. More than two-thirds of the 317 homes, which range from \$260,000 to \$375,000, have been sold.

"I was trying to do something I'd be proud of," he says. "I'd be embarrassed to do something ugly, cookie-cutter. I'd be embarrassed to live in one. I'd be embarrassed to build one."

Neighboring Forsyth County passed an ordinance two years ago; three subdivisions have been approved, and two are pending.

Developer Bill Evans of Fox Creek Properties is seeking approval for his second conservation subdivision, The Preserve at Eagle's Ridge, on Nicholson Road. Plans call for 921 homes -- priced between \$200,000 and \$350,000 -- on 704 acres. Evans plans to set aside 338 acres as open space along the Etowah River and build a private sewer plant.

Evans says he tried to do a similar development 12 years ago, and it didn't sell well. But now homeowners are more environmentally conscious, and developers want to seize on that.

"Developers are creatures of habit, number one," he says. "They will build or develop what the county allows them to. If the zoning regulations do not allow for ecologically sensitive development, they won't do it."

Don Broussard, an Atlanta planning consultant, has been pushing to make conservation subdivisions a requirement in DeKalb County.

"It's up to the professional planning staffs to advise the elected officials to do the right thing, not wait on the private sector to say we can live with that," he says. "Something like conservation design should not be dependent on whether developers find it acceptable or not. It should be mandatory, and it has been proven for a decade in other parts of the country."

### Where the turtles live

Michael Pawlukiewicz, director of environment and policy at the Urban Land Institute, a Washington think tank that promotes responsible development, likes the conservation idea because of the environmental benefit. But the developments are still causing sprawl, he says.

"If we're not doing anything about providing transportation alternatives, what have you really accomplished?" he asks. "We've saved some of nature -- that's a positive thing. But you haven't affected anything like air quality or energy efficiency."

No matter to Terry and Sari Chism, who moved in February to Governor's Preserve off Ga. 20 in Cherokee. When it's finished, the development will have 431 homes on 862 acres.

At least once a week, their sons delve into in the woods. On a recent hot morning, 10-year-old Joseph spots some deer tracks, while Jordy, 7, finds a turtle.

The boys are still mastering the Boy Scout ways of leaving nature undisturbed.

"Let the turtle go," Terry Chism says. "He lives out here."

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