

Turning Open Space Challenges into Opportunities by David N. Zacharias, L.S.

As more and more municipalities update comprehensive plans and zoning codes, open space protection through the development approval process is increasingly an addition to those updates. Quite often, if the development parcel is “x” acres, you must protect “y”% of that total acreage. Many towns are willing to accept open spaces as long as the development plan meets the required percentage, regardless of potential opportunities that open space might offer residents of the development. Wetlands, flood plains, and steep slopes are all obvious inclusions in the proposed open spaces. When those areas do not total the required percentages, the developer can take the opportunity to evaluate the site and perhaps consider including amenities such as trails to enhance the project and its value to future residents.

In October 2003 my family and I had the opportunity to visit London as well as parts of rural England. While London was a bustling “eye popping” experience, our favorite stay was in a 16th century Abbots retreat house located in Broadway, Gloucestershire, England. It wasn’t our favorite because of all the beautiful unique honey colored sandstone architecture or the 17th century pubs in the area. It was our favorite because of the way the rural landscape was utilized with a well thought out, well planned, and well-implemented system of hiking trails and its integration and relationship to living neighborhoods.

The “Cotswold Way” is a 100-mile long trail from Chipping Campden to Bath that connects quaint villages and beautiful vistas throughout. In Broadway alone there were 3 different hikes ranging from 5 miles to 12 miles and leading to other villages and back to Broadway again. Along the way the trails meandered through sheep pastures, horse pastures and woodlots, always leading to a destination and were seldom along roadways. Sometimes the destination was an historic building, such as a 13th century church, and other times it was simply an absolute breathtaking view of the Welsh mountains to the west. On our hikes we met others that were utilizing the trails for exercise, hiking to a destination as we were, or simply walking the dogs. The trails system really took advantage of the best the properties had to offer, whether it was to a beautiful vista overlooking the Welsh hills and valleys or through a woodlot and pasture. The trails system was planned to weave the community fabric and take advantage of the features and character of the properties.

When I had been involved in discussions and potential planning of a town wide, or even regional trail system in the past, landowners often didn’t want any part of the trail, raising concerns relative to potential abuse and damage to their property. Along the Cotswold Way we found the solution to those concerns of property damage arising from misuse by 4-wheelers, snowmobiles, etc., was the construction of “stepping stiles” and “kissing gates”. The stepping stiles and kissing gates allow easily pedestrian crossings over or through the stone or wire fences while keeping the animals in and ATVs out. These stiles and gates allow the trails to pass through many separate properties while giving the landowner satisfaction that his property and livestock are safe.

Of course, not all sites are suitable to this concept and not all homeowners are drawn to this type of amenity. When planning for your next project, let BME Associates share our vision and ability to add value to your entire development. Perhaps you will consider a design that might make all the lots in a subdivision “premium” lots by incorporating quality open space throughout, or allowing the lot with the best view to be used as a community space so all residents can enjoy the view, not just a select few. Think about the potential of a trail system that will allow connection through the next property. These ideas can certainly add value to all the lots. Remember that your customers are visual as well as active. They all want to be able to enjoy the nice quiet walk through the meadow or enjoy a picnic lunch with the kids overlooking the lake. They want to get off the main roadways when they walk or jog. Whether the open space is active as in trails and playing fields, or passive for nature lovers and wildlife habitat, remember to keep in mind the little things that will not only help meet the needs of the municipality, they will better provide the opportunity for homebuyers to own a home where they want with the amenities and opportunities they desire.