

Executive Summary

Conservation-Based Affordable Housing: Improving the Nature of Affordable Housing to Protect Place and People spotlights the opportunity to develop housing for low- and moderate-income residents and also protect natural and working landscapes. These case studies, information about limited development as a conservation tool, and a perspective on where this trend may be headed are part of the Fund's report.

For decades, proponents of land conservation and affordable housing have rarely seen the common ground they might occupy. Instead of collaborating, principals from these two interests competed over development proposals and scarce funding. Thankfully, new approaches are helping communities move away from an “us-versus-them” debate and toward recognition of the connections, and even the benefits, of integrating land conservation and development.

Smart growth is prompting new partnerships between former adversaries in communities nationwide. “Sustainability” has moved beyond a mere buzzword to become a way of doing business for an increasing number of businesses and government leaders. Increasingly business, land development, and environmental professionals, along with local and state government officials, are recognizing the benefits of greater integration between the built environment and nature.

At the same time, land conservation and housing professionals are experiencing unprecedented challenges to protecting places and providing for people. The accelerating consumption and fragmentation of open space is the number one challenge to the preservation of natural areas. Each year more than two million acres of farms, woodlands, and natural areas are developed. The results too often have produced subdivisions amid Civil War battlefields, isolated and unproductive farms, fragmented wildlife habitat, and damaging stormwater discharges into wetlands and waterways.

These headlines are joined with others that report a widening gap between wages and housing costs. In Las

Vegas and Lincoln, Seattle and Sarasota, and places in between, housing prices are accelerating faster than wage increases, exacerbating the housing shortage for low- and moderate-income community members such as teachers, nurses, firefighters, and police officers. The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that low-income workers are priced out of housing markets across the country. In 2005, nearly 95 million people—35 percent of U.S. households—had some type of housing problem.

The Response

The Conservation Fund recognizes that sustainable communities have good jobs, adequate housing, and a strong sense of place derived from local natural and cultural resources. To this end, the Fund pioneers a balanced approach to land conservation that integrates economic and environmental objectives.

The Conservation Fund embarked on its Conservation Based Affordable Housing study to discover whether conservation-based collaboration and market-based mechanisms could integrate community, economic, and environmental goals. “Green building” focuses on material composition, energy, and water use, but “conservation development” adds more emphasis on protection of the land and water resources. While the body of case material for conservation developments is growing, the well-known project examples are limited almost exclusively to the upper end of the housing market. To this end, The Conservation Fund set out to uncover and document conservation developments for the low- and middle-income housing market.

The Findings

The study details 16 successful examples of conservation-based affordable housing, ranging across urban, suburban, and rural communities. The profiles document each development's housing and conservation features, while providing background on design and financing, as well as information on the protection and stewardship of the housing and conservation land. The study also provides the lessons learned from the devel-

opers, land trusts, local governments, and housing organizations behind these developments, including site assessment, public support, and financing. The study includes promising trends for conservation-based affordable housing and strategies for forging more creative partnerships between land conservation and affordable housing. Of note,

- Communities can provide well-designed homes for low- and moderate-income residents as well as preserve treasured community lands. The profiled developments provided between 2 and 1,200 affordable homes and from 7 to 1,500 acres of open space. All but two of the developments—both urban infill redevelopment sites—provided more than 50 percent open space for a variety of conservation purposes.
- Conservation-based affordable housing can exist in urban, suburban, and rural settings. Successful examples range in age from 30 years old to as recent as 2005.
- The innovative leadership behind these developments required varied and unusual partnerships between private developers, local governments, land trusts, housing organizations, and other nonprofit groups.
- Partnerships among diverse organizations allow them to share skills and reduce risk to any one organization.
- New funding sources can spring from the pairing of land conservation and affordable housing. This counters the assumption that affordable housing or land conservation drives up costs.

- By addressing community needs for housing and natural resource protection together and engaging community members in the process, conservation-based affordable housing developments can forge new public and political support.
- The best conservation-based affordable housing examples reflect the need for connections to ensure the strategic protection of conservation areas, appropriate to the conservation intent, and the location of housing in a pattern that least disturbs the resources while ideally placed close to jobs, services, and transit opportunities, appropriate to the landscape setting.

Next Steps

The Fund hopes its study will encourage more communities to develop affordable housing that values the surrounding natural resources. These developments can and should reflect innovative site design and green building techniques that meet the needs of people, whether of modest, moderate, or wealthier means. There is a great need in the United States for a more strategic vision to achieve sustainable development protective of irreplaceable landscapes, finite natural resources, and unique community character, while enhancing economic opportunities for all.

The Conservation Fund calls for a summit on conservation-based affordable housing. Leaders from all affected interests need to pioneer new partnerships to advance land conservation and development that serves people and places. The Fund welcomes information on other examples of conservation-based affordable housing to further promote the will, commitment, and leadership that guide such successful strategic initiatives.