

Better Together

Community and sustainability

BY OLGA RONAY
 You're interested in living sustainably, but wouldn't it be cool if all your neighbors were too?

For people who live in green communities, that's a reality. Planned communities, where the focus extends beyond an individual home or lot, create opportunities to meet residents' needs in ways that are sustainable, economical, beautiful – and maybe healthier, too. A sustainable planning approach can apply to infrastructure like drainage and transportation, as well as infrastructure that supports social life, like community gardens and common buildings. Let's take a look at some Western North Carolina communities that have built sustainability into their design. We'll also look at ways to retrofit the community you live in to make it more sustainable.

Designing a green community starts with understanding the site. What are its natural features? What's nearby? What impacts will be created by development? How can negative impacts be minimized, or better yet, turned into positives?

Two hallmarks of the Western North Carolina region are water and mountains – wonderful features when treated with respect. Keeping homes off of steep slopes and out of floodplains is a critical first step. But that doesn't mean residents have to forego mountain views or creekside walks. Clustering development on the most suitable land allows for larger open spaces that can protect natural resources, as well as be enjoyed by residents.

In West Asheville, Davenport Park clustered 15 houses on 2.4 acres. Individual yards are small; instead residents share an area of undeveloped land along a stream. That buffer protects the stream and connects to a public greenway – fostering connections with neighbors both inside and outside the community.

The open space created by clustering houses also supports a biologically-based stormwater treatment system. Rainwater can pose

problems in developed areas, not only for flooding but because of pollution from vehicles and litter. In Davenport Park, what looks like a planted area in the median is in fact an engineered stormwater system. Collecting the water protects against flooding, while plants and filtration media ensure that water is clean when it does reenter the stream. Some residents have also installed cisterns to collect rainwater from their roof, or to create rain gardens to hold water and help it infiltrate into the ground. In large-scale natural stormwater treat-



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ment systems, retention areas can double as play fields – when it's not raining.

Green homes are a given in green communities, but good planning can multiply the advantages. In Davenport Park, streets were laid out so that houses could take advantage of passive (and active) solar. At Westwood Cohousing, a 23-house community in West Asheville (featured on the cover), a central solar collector heats water



Davenport Park features a centralized treatment cell to collect runoff and filter sediment and pollutants. Equinox photo

As Western North Carolina becomes more sustainability-minded with its building practices, green communities are becoming a popular option for homebuyers. High Cove photo

used in all the houses, as well as for radiant floor heating.

Site location can offer significant sustainability advantages. With infill sites like Davenport Park, impacts to the natural environment have already occurred, urban services already exist, and higher densities and a mix of uses make it more likely that people can walk, bike, or use transit for daily needs. The city of Asheville has recognized such advantages in permitting projects like Davenport Park and Craggy Park, both of which required special City Council approval. The city is now considering code changes to reduce the barriers to small-scale infill development.

Rural and semi-rural communities also offer opportunities for sustainable development. At Drovers Road Preserve in Buncombe County, developers protected a 110-acre preserve surrounding the houses. "The preserve," says Dena Chan-

dler of Equinox Environmental, "was delineated based on an inventory of plant communities, water resources, and slope conditions, and is protected by a permanent conservation easement." Olivette, located along the French Broad River north of Asheville, calls itself an "agrihood" in recognition of the community's working farm. Like many rural communities, they offer a network of trails.

There's another dimension to sustainability – the social one. Westwood Cohousing boasts an impressive array of green infrastructure, but as an intentional community its physical features are also designed to strengthen social connections. Cars are kept at the edge, creating a central green space that's quiet and safe for all residents, especially children. In addition to individual homes, Westwood has a common house where residents gather for meals, movies, and birthday parties. The common house includes shared office equipment and guest rooms for residents' guests, which allows houses to be smaller and therefore less expensive to build and maintain. Westwood

also has a community garden.

Sharing things like garden tools, printers, and kayaks saves money and resources and makes it easier for neighbors to do things together, which in turn creates a strong social fabric. Intentional communities are often organized around shared values. The High Cove community, in a rural setting northeast of Asheville, is focused on environmental stewardship, as well as arts, science, and lifelong learning. The High Cove Institute and AS IF center help support this mission through events, classes, and residencies.

Living in a green community may have another advantage. Turns out that in addition to saving the planet, living in a green community may add years to your life. In his book "Blue Zones," Dan Buettner identifies characteristics shared by people who live the longest, health-



Community gardens are a key feature in many green communities.

iest, and happiest lives on the planet. These include moderate daily exercise like walking and gardening, eating healthy local food, and having multiple rich social connections.

The good news is you don't have to move to a green community to live sustainably. In fact, making the community you live in more sustainable is one of the most powerful things you can do – for yourself and the planet. Here are some ideas:

Invite your neighbors to a potluck – There's nothing like sharing food to build friendships. www.shareable.net/blog/how-to-reinvent-the-potluck

Grow a community garden – Potlucks are even better when the food is locally grown by community members. No space? Just start by planting an edible garden in your front yard. www.bountifulcities.org

Hold a community yard sale – Declutter your house, find treasures, make a buck or support a charity, and meet neighbors.

Share stuff – Shared tools, free community bikes, 'little free libraries' – all examples of the sharing econ-

omy. What's a good fit for your community?

Volunteer at a park, school, or community center – Get to know neighbors while supporting a community asset.

Start a neighborhood storytelling event – Storytelling is fun way to get together, and is deeply rooted in Appalachian culture.

Make places special through art or history – Celebrate the unique qualities of your community through public art, or connections to its history.

Support sustainable planning in your community – Learn about your community's land use and planning rules and support initiatives that will result in green, walkable, mixed-use, vibrant places. www.cnu.org

Help elders age in place with a virtual community – Multi-gen-

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Olga Ronay is a city planner and co-founder and resident of High Cove, a Western North Carolina community focused on arts, science, environmental stewardship and lifelong learning. High Cove features green-built homes, a forest preserve, hiking trails, a community garden and lifelong learning institute. An organic farm and small mixed-use center are planned. Olga expects to continue playing basketball until she's 100 years old.