

CLUSTER SUBDIVISION DESIGN OVERVIEW

Cluster subdivision design, also referred to as open space subdivision design, involves grouping—or “clustering”—dwellings on a portion of a development parcel to preserve the remainder of the parcel in open space. Management options for the open space areas include, among others, preservation of existing natural features, restoration of natural conditions, and agricultural use.

The open space may be owned by a homeowners association, a county or local government, the State, a land trust or other nonprofit conservation organization, or the original landowner. Conservation easements and deed restrictions should be used to protect the common open space from future conversion to more intensive uses. The local or county government with primary responsibility for approving the subdivision should also require submittal of a Stewardship Plan for restoring and maintaining common open space areas.



Illustration of Cluster Subdivision Design

In comparison to conventional subdivision designs, cluster subdivisions afford greater opportunity for preserving open space and maintaining the natural resources of the parcel being developed. When properly designed, the visual impact of new residential development from surrounding streets and adjoining parcels can be minimized and significant natural features and/or agricultural lands can be protected from development. Public infrastructure maintenance costs may also be reduced due to shortened street and utility lengths.

A cluster subdivision is defined by the Commission as a housing development characterized by compact lots and permanently preserved open space, where the natural features of the site are retained to the greatest extent possible. The Commission recommends that a minimum of 60% of the net site area be set aside as open space in the subdivision in unsewered (rural) areas. In sewerred (urban) areas, it is desirable to have a minimum of 40% of the net site area be set aside as open space. The net site area is defined as the gross tract area minus all street and utility rights-of-way existing prior to development.

Several county and local (city, village, and town) governments in the Region have adopted regulations that would accommodate cluster subdivisions. A summary of these regulations is provided in [this table](#). Note that not all the county and local government regulations comply with Commission recommendations for cluster subdivisions, including recommendations for the minimum percentage of open space to be set aside and the requirement for Stewardship Plans for common open space.

Conservation Subdivision

Although the term “conservation subdivision” is also used to refer to housing development characterized by compact lots and preserved open space, Randall Arendt, one of the leading proponents of conservation design and author of several books on the subject, has recommended that the term “conservation subdivisions” be used only to describe subdivisions in rural (unsewered) areas at relatively low housing densities that set aside a significant amount of open space (60% to 75% open space, including a portion of “unconstrained” land that would otherwise be developable due to the absence of wetlands, floodplains, or other constraints).

Section 66.1027(1)(a) of the *Wisconsin Statutes* defines a conservation subdivision as “a housing development in a rural setting that is characterized by compact lots and common open space, and where the natural features of land are maintained to the greatest extent possible.” Although the Statutory definition does not specify a minimum percentage of open space, it does describe conservation subdivisions in terms of rural development. The Commission therefore uses the more general term “cluster subdivision” to refer to housing development that clusters housing units to help preserve open space on a development site, which can include development in both urban and rural areas. Initial Commission publications on the subject use the term “rural cluster development” because they focused on cluster subdivisions in rural areas.