

Thoughts on Rural Clustered Development

By Muriel Zeller

Rural clustered development is best used as a replacement for traditional subdivisions on land that is already slated for residential or commercial development. Clustered development should not be used to justify residential developments on resource production land away from community centers. Rural clustered development zoning that prevents sprawling residential development on resource production land outside community planning boundaries should be considered as part of the ongoing Calaveras County zoning code update.

The Calaveras County General Plan (adopted November 2019) defines clustered development or clustering as development “in which a number of dwelling units are placed in closer proximity than usual, or are attached, with the purpose of retaining an open-space area, e.g., conservation, recreation and/or agriculture (page GL-2).” Unfortunately, the definition is vague and does not distinguish *rural* clustered development from other types.

The General Plan has proposed “to maintain open space, conserve and promote effective use of natural resources, and preserve the rural character of the county through encouraging clustering, infill, and designing new development to conserve natural, scenic, and cultural resources (page COS-1).” To facilitate clustered development the general plan contains the following policies and implementation measures:

1. COS 3.1: To protect sensitive biological resources, new development shall use site planning techniques, including buffers and setbacks, and encourage other techniques such as clustering of development (IM COS-4B).
2. LU 4.4: Encourage clustering of residential development where appropriate, based on availability of infrastructure and community character, to increase open space and housing affordability, and reduce infrastructure costs (IM LU-2A and LU-2E).
3. LU-2E Innovative Techniques: Adopt standards for the application of clustered development or other innovative techniques that may provide development flexibility and minimize development impacts on resource production or other sensitive lands (Implements: Policy LU 1.2 and LU 4.4).

Typically, clustered development does not make housing more affordable as number 2 above implies. In fact, “cluster development inherently creates a marketing and sales advantage [for the developer], because greenways, open space, common areas and wildlife are attractive amenities for potential home buyers (<https://planningtank.com/urbanisation/cluster-development>).”

However, it is number 3, in particular, which gives me pause, because it specifically talks about the “application of clustered development... on resource production or other sensitive lands,” which is not a new idea in Calaveras County. In February 2012, then Planning Director Rebecca Willis gave a presentation to the Board of Supervisors on how to cluster residential development on a working ranch as part of a discussion on the General Plan land use map. So let’s look at a hypothetical clustering scenario on resource production land:

- A 320-acre working cattle ranch zoned A1
- Density = one dwelling per 20 acres
- Subdivision potential = 16 parcels

Under the zoning, a rancher could create sixteen 20-acre parcels, which would follow traditional subdivision design, or he/she could create a residential cluster of fifteen one-acre parcels with one 305-acre remainder parcel, which would effectively preserve the working ranch and the open space with its ecosystem services intact.

The first step would be to identify the open space to be protected and design the residential development on the remaining land. The ranch would be protected in perpetuity with a conservation easement which would assure the buyers of the one-acre parcels that they would never lose their adjacent open space. The rancher may or may not be the builder/developer, but, in any case, the rancher makes money from the sale of the residential parcels and from the sale of the development rights on the 305-acre remainder parcel which would be under a conservation easement held by a qualified land trust.

There are, however, some potential problems with this scenario. Where is the ranch located? What is the level of service on the roads used to access the property? What about emergency services? Will there be adequate groundwater? Would 15 homes clustered on a ranch outside of a community center be leapfrog development? What if the rancher owns an entire section, i.e., 640 acres? We now have the potential for twice as many clustered homes well removed from any community center.

Cluster development “has been criticized as a tool that promotes sprawl, just a different form of sprawl than conventional development. Such criticism is valid, and it is important to note that this tool best helps to protect open space when used in conjunction with other tools, such as Urban Growth Boundaries (<https://planningtank.com/urbanisation/cluster-development>).”

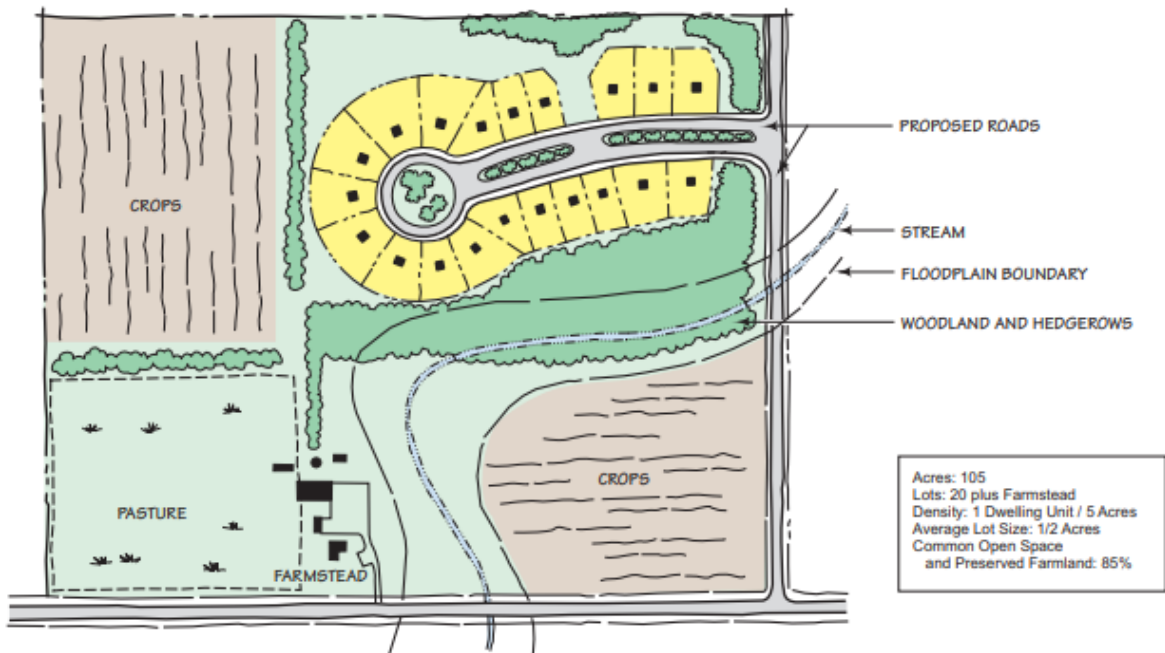
In addition, many planners “believe that rural cluster housing could conflict with, rather than protect, agricultural uses. This suggests that rural clustering may make more sense as an alternative to large-lot (one to 10 acres) zoning in transitional areas where residential development is already displacing major commercial farming and forestry operations. In these circumstances, rural cluster developments can prevent open lands from being fragmented and can preserve open tracts large enough for wildlife habitat, recreation, and certain kinds of smaller-scale agriculture and forestry that are compatible with residential development. The preservation of these activities amid residential development will enhance the rural character of the area (Rural Cluster Zoning: Survey and Guidelines by Gary Pivo, Robert Small, and Charles R. Wolfe).”

Rural clustered development or conservation subdivision design is best applied to areas in or adjacent to community centers. Such developments could make good transition zones between the dense development of a community center and the surrounding open landscape.

CONVENTIONAL SUBDIVISION DESIGN



CONSERVATION SUBDIVISION DESIGN



Conservation subdivision development can help preserve farming activities.

Source of graphics: The Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC)