



## **What Is Cluster Development?**

Cluster development is a design technique or zoning strategy that involves grouping houses on smaller lots in one area of a development while preserving the remaining land on the site for recreation, common open space, or protection of environmentally sensitive areas.

### **Description**

Cluster development allows, or in some cases mandates, grouping dwellings on a part of a given parcel of land instead of spreading the units evenly across the parcel on large lots. Development on the remainder of the parcel outside of the "cluster" is restricted, generally through a conservation easement (*see Fact Sheet No. 10*). Cluster zoning usually allows at least the same overall density that would be permitted under traditional zoning regulations, and often allows closer spacing of dwellings than would normally be permitted. In some cases, developers are given a density bonus for using clustering, meaning they can build more homes than would normally be permitted by the governing zoning regulations as an incentive for preserving more open space.

### **Considerations**

Cluster zoning provides greater flexibility to fit development to the natural characteristics of the land and permits the preservation of prime agricultural land or land containing sensitive natural resources. By concentrating homes in areas best suited to development, the technique may also reduce infrastructure costs, which can benefit both the developer who pays initial construction costs for infrastructure and the local government that assumes responsibility for maintenance. The clustering of units also permits the construction of private shared wastewater treatment facilities in areas where public sewer systems are not available. When combined with a permanent conservation easement, clustering is effective at providing long-term open space protection. To be most effective at preserving critical open space, cluster zoning should be guided by conservation design techniques that begin with the identification of the elements of the land to be preserved; place buildings, utilities, roads, and trails on unconstrained land in relationship to these elements; and, as a last step, define the corresponding lot lines. Because of the closer proximity of homes, it is important that dwellings be scaled and sited to maintain appropriate relationships to each other and the surrounding landscape and that transportation patterns be planned carefully. Local governments also must ensure that the design review process for cluster zoning is not so burdensome that developers are discouraged from using the technique.

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## **Where It Is Working**

Cluster zoning and cluster development are common techniques throughout the United States. Lake Elmo, Minnesota has implemented a clustering zoning ordinance, and a number of cluster developments have been built within its borders. One of the oldest and best-known is Fields of St. Croix, a residential subdivision with 125 single-family homes clustered on 40 percent of a 240-acre site. The remaining undeveloped land is covered by a 90-acre conservation easement, which includes restored prairie and oak savanna, as well as agricultural land that is currently used by a community-supported organic farm.

In Minnesota, the general zoning authority granted to municipalities by state statute enables cluster zoning.