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By H. Lee Murphy

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Green housing forges ahead

Eco-centric developers defy sluggish market

Construction of conventional subdivisions has slowed around much of the Chicago area, but that hasn't stopped a handful of developers from pushing ahead with plans for "conservation communities."

Conservation Design Development LLC recently broke ground on its 243-acre, 107-home Rhapsody Cove at Rock Creek in far south suburban Bourbonnais. Meanwhile, John DeWald & Associates, a development firm in Encinitas, Calif., is designing a 114-home project called Serosun Farms on 410 acres of farmland near U.S. Route 20 and State Route 47 in far northwest suburban Hampshire. Officials there are expected to review DeWald's plans early next year.



Each of these projects features low-density housing — 60% to 70% of land is preserved as open space — and a host of natural elements.

Serosun, for instance, will showcase a 160-acre working organic farm as well as an equestrian riding facility with eight miles of horse trails. Rhapsody is promoting a parcel of 100 acres of restored prairie in the center of its housing development and the preservation of all 1,000 trees on the property.

There appears to be demand for this kind of green development. Conservation Design broke ground on Rhapsody Cove only three months ago but already has sold one-third of its lots, most priced at around \$150,000 each.

DeWald is warning buyers that they will be living among the smells of manure and barnyard animals when construction starts in a year. Still, people are showing interest in the one-acre sites priced at \$300,000 and up, according to John DeWald, president of his namesake firm.

"We're not particularly concerned about the rest of the residential marketplace," says Mark Johnson, owner of Bourbonnais-based Conservation Design. "We're concentrated on creating something very different from the norm. We've found that conservation values are important to a certain segment of home buyers."

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Serosun Farms in Hampshire features a 160-acre working organic farm and an equestrian riding facility.

Serosun Farms was the idea of Mr. DeWald's sister, Jane Strickland, the owner of an 80-acre horse farm in Hampshire. "She saw the fast-advancing Chicago suburbs coming toward Hampshire," Mr. DeWald recalls. "She wanted a way to keep the suburban sprawl away. We hatched an idea to preserve the rural feel and still make some money."

How much money is a matter of some conjecture. The model for these new-age communities is Prairie Crossing, a development of 359 single-family homes on 675 acres, with more than half of the land preserved as open space, much of it restored prairie. Located in north suburban Grayslake, Prairie Crossing features a 90-acre organic farm and a dairy barn built in 1885 that functions as a community center.

Under conventional zoning, the developer, Prairie Holdings Corp., could have built as many as 1,600 homes on its property. By limiting development, George Ranney, chairman and CEO of Prairie Holdings, says he was able to get an extra 30% in price from home buyers starting in 1994, when construction kicked off.



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live in a green home, then a lot of home buyers will get stressed and weigh the tradeoffs carefully. Nonetheless, I think eventually you'll see more communities like these getting built around Chicago."

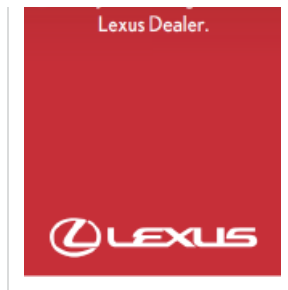
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