

P L A N N I N G F O R G R O W T H



MAINTAINING GIBSONS' SMALL TOWN CHARACTER

Jennifer Kay
PLAN 548 B: Penny Gurstein
School of Community and Regional Planning
University of British Columbia
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INTRODUCTION

The "Fresh Eyes on Gibsons" design studio resulted in a set of alternative development scenarios for the Town of Gibsons. The individual teams subscribed to a series of unique visions, ranging from the extreme - "freeze the urban footprint" to the serene - "nurture distinct neighbourhoods". Although the ideas manifested into dramatically different drawings, the underlying themes were consistent throughout the majority of the students' work. The focus was on sustainability and the proposals repeatedly emphasized the importance of preserving natural areas from future development. The teams' recommendations for compact, mixed-use neighbourhoods echo current planning theory that aims to achieve more sustainable development; neo-traditional planning or new urbanism prescribes land use patterns from the past to influence the way new communities are designed. Building upon these ideas, the architecture, landscape architecture and planning students sought to identify a set of community building blocks that would complement and preserve the rural character of Gibsons.

The presentations of the alternative strategies outlined in detail why it is important to design sustainable communities, and provided numerous representations of what Gibsons could look like in the future, yet the teams fell short of time to explore in depth how such strategies could be implemented. This paper is intended to outline one approach to achieving more sustainable residential development. "Open space zoning", or conservation design for subdivisions is presented as a means of balancing the demand for growth with the need to protect the natural environment. This method, developed by site planner Randall Arendt, is unique because it outlines a simple and successful strategy to protect valuable natural areas while allowing for and accommodating future growth.

MAINTAINING THE "SMALL TOWN" CHARACTER

Gibsons is a community that is defined by its small town character. People move to the Sunshine Coast to live the 'small town lifestyle', which offers residents the opportunity to own property in a community where they can develop close relationships with their neighbours and enjoy the surrounding natural environment. The compact form of traditional small towns, often the result of incremental growth, provides character and definition to the built environment and supports a strong sense of community among residents. Perhaps even more important than the compact development pattern are the open spaces that define the edges of small towns in rural settings.

Although most people take these spaces for granted, hardly noticing them in any conscious way as they go about their daily business, they are strongly affected when such land begins to sprout buildings and parking lots. Few things change the character of small towns and rural communities more than the conversion of these natural areas to development. Whether appreciated for their aesthetic, recreational, or sporting benefits, such areas often hold deep meaning for long-term residents (Arendt, 1994).

Communities located along the Sunshine Coast are set within the context of the expansive, undeveloped natural environment; Gibsons is one such community that is strongly shaped by both the open spaces that are scattered within the town's boundaries and the natural areas that exist at its edges. These natural features, however, are threatened by the pattern of development that has taken place in Gibsons over the last few decades. If the current blueprint of expansion is allowed to replicate, it is likely that many of the special places in Gibsons will not be recognizable twenty or thirty years from now, unless they are protected in public parks or formal land reserves.

The Town of Gibsons and the surrounding communities are expected to double in population over the next thirty to forty years, which means that an additional ten thousand people will be living, working and recreating in the area. According to such population

predictions, change is inevitable; however, the shape and form of future growth is not yet predetermined. The residents of Gibsons have the opportunity to influence how their community will develop to accommodate the expected population growth; challenged with the task of shaping future development, residents and public officials require an understanding of successful growth management tools in order to imagine and achieve a desired community vision.

Growth management strategies are designed to combat the social, environmental and economic costs of conventional development patterns, which support the sprawl of urban land uses into the surrounding rural areas. Planners and designers now have the responsibility to help communities establish new patterns of development that encourage more sustainable development. There is a need to develop more compact communities that consume less land and that are less dependent upon the automobile, where residents can walk or cycle to access services and amenities; the aging boomer generation, for example, demands a more walkable community where they can get about without having to drive (Thompson, 1999). Large-lot single-family residential neighbourhoods and strip mall style commercial districts are the current building blocks of development in Gibsons. The existing land inventory cannot support this style of suburban development without compromising the environmental quality of the area and destroying the natural spaces that define the small town, rural character of Gibsons.

Growth management strategies offer solutions to suburban sprawl; however, gaining public support for such initiatives is often difficult. "Planning theory offers great potential solutions that very few local governments have had the political will (and popular support) to implement (e.g., urban growth boundaries (UGBs), combined with effective agricultural zoning (EAZ) and sometimes softened through the transfer of development rights (TDR) and/or the purchase of development rights (PDR))" (Arendt, 1999). Arendt (1999) goes on to note that "a significant part of the public resistance to these two techniques [UGBs and TDR] often lies in the apprehensiveness of local residents and officials regarding the appearance and feel of the new, denser development that these tools help create". It is important to show residents that a more compact residential pattern will not urbanize Gibsons, but rather may help preserve the rural character of town that residents cherish. This report will outline an alternative to the conventional

zoning strategy that could be implemented to design future residential developments in a manner that preserves the rural character of Gibsons, while meeting the demand for growth. A key element of this open space zoning design process is the visualisation of the alternative development scenarios, which enables residents and decision-makers to see the implications of prospective land use decisions and zoning regulations.

WHAT IS OPEN SPACE ZONING?

In rural communities, the suburban pattern of development not only compromises the integrity of the natural environment, but also alters the character of the built environment by eroding the small town features that provide community definition. The loss of natural open space to development permanently changes the character of small towns, and results in the establishment of subdivisions that lack connection to their surroundings. The suburban model of development creates placeless neighbourhoods that are disassociated from the natural landscape. A new set of building blocks informed and shaped by the principles of sustainable development needs to be established and implemented. A system of parks and open spaces can form the foundation of future residential development in Gibsons. The term “open space” zoning refers to a creative alternative to conventional zoning that ensures preservation of open space through the design of residential developments (Arendt, 1992). While conventional zoning typically results in a seamless network of subdivisions, shopping centres and office or industrial parks, with little space left for “green” parks, open space zoning maintains natural areas as the founding features of new development.

In British Columbia, local governments can build an inventory of parks and open spaces through the subdivision process; for example, when private lands in Gibsons are subdivided, the Town has the option of requiring landowners to dedicate five percent of their parcel area as parkland (Town of Gibsons, 1996). Although municipalities have the power to control the quantity of parkland, the quality of parkland acquired during subdivision is not currently regulated. The *Local Government Act* only states that the parkland must be sited in a location satisfactory to the municipality (Government of British Columbia, 2000). Unfortunately, in some

cases the land dedicated through subdivision is essentially the left over or un-buildable portion of the site. Federal, provincial and local government regulations work together to protect environmentally sensitive areas, such as streams and riparian zones, wetlands and threatened habitat areas and to prevent development from occurring on geo-technically unstable lands or floodplains; these sites are essentially the areas where building cannot occur. It is not the intention to question the importance of these sites as protected areas, but rather to recognize that this process of identifying parklands can fail to provide a means of preserving the special features of a site that are valuable for their aesthetic beauty or their recreational qualities. Open space zoning, in contrast, prescribes a method of preserving both primary (i.e., environmentally sensitive) and secondary (i.e., visually important) conservation areas through the subdivision process.

WHAT DOES OPEN SPACE ZONING LOOK LIKE?

Open space zoning is based upon the principle of clustered development. Residential neighbourhoods can be arranged in a more compact form, allowing some of the land to remain undeveloped. The clustered pattern of residential land use can accommodate a variety of housing types, including single-family homes on small lots, town houses, apartments or condominiums. It is important to note that clustered development can be composed of only single family homes; "in fact, the classic rural village settlement pattern is a superb example of single-family clustering, sometimes with a central green constituting the permanently preserved open space" (Arendt, 1992). Given Gibsons' current residential market, which favours single family homes, open space zoning could allow for the continued development of housing types that are appropriate in scale and density for the "small town" setting. The small lot single-family homes that can be created through open space zoning are more compatible with the traditional rural landscape than the conventional suburban model. The most important feature of subdivisions designed around the principle of open space zoning is that development potential is not lost; the same overall amount of development that is already permitted to occur is simply designed to be located on only a portion of the site. The remaining land is then protected as permanent open space.

Open space zoning does not attempt to urbanize an existing rural area. Instead, this technique of designing subdivisions allows a community to grow and expand in a rural character because it encourages smaller lots and the preservation of open green space. The visual impact of the higher density clustered housing is offset by the preservation of open space around the development; it is an attractive alternative to suburban sprawl. Open space zoning is a more sustainable form of land development; the smaller lots demand less land consumption. However, the real benefit of open space zoning is that the entire site is not lost to high-density housing, but rather, up to half of the parcel is preserved as permanent open space. The open space can take the form of greenways, parks or nature reserves along streams corridors, in wooded areas or open meadows.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

“How do we accommodate and even encourage growth without losing the unique character that is the heart of the small town? The small town design process requires public officials and the public-at-large to develop an understanding of the community's visual resources” (Daniels, Keller & Lapping, 1995). A successful open space zoning or conservation design process is dependent upon a complete and comprehensive community inventory. Community mapping and site analyses include documentation of the natural, cultural and historic features of a community, a neighbourhood or an individual site. This information-gathering phase of the process informs the subsequent steps in the design exercise as it identifies the community places that residents perceive as special. Arendt (1996) outlines a basic process for transforming the community inventory information through the design process into plans for sustainable, attractive residential subdivisions. Build-out maps are effective design tools, which are used to depict the effect of land use decisions on the ground; the visualization of yield plans displaying what is allowed under current zoning practice is a powerful method of gaining support for open space zoning. The following diagrams, from Randall Arendt's *Conservation Design for Subdivisions* (1996), depict the planning and design process that can be implemented to achieve open space zoning.

YIELD PLAN USING CONVENTIONAL DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

Under existing subdivision requirements, this site could be divided into 32 two-acre lots. Primary conservation areas, composed of wetlands, floodplains and steep slopes remain as open space at the periphery of the residential development.



This rendering depicts what the site would look like if it were developed according to the yield plan, with the 32 single-family lots spanning most of the 82-acre site.



IDENTIFICATION OF PRIMARY CONSERVATION AREAS

The primary conservation areas, typically identified under conventional development practices include wetlands and associated floodplain soils and the steeply sloped lands along the northwest portion of the site.

IDENTIFICATION OF SECONDARY CONSERVATION AREAS

The second stage of the site analysis involves a more creative approach to the identification of open space areas to include culturally and aesthetically significant features. Secondary conservation areas include outward views from the site and views into the site from the adjacent roadway. In addition, a grassy knoll, meadows and significant tree stands were identified. Such special features help define the rural character of the site and would not normally be considered for preservation under conventional development practices.

PLACEMENT OF LOTS, ROADS AND TRAILS

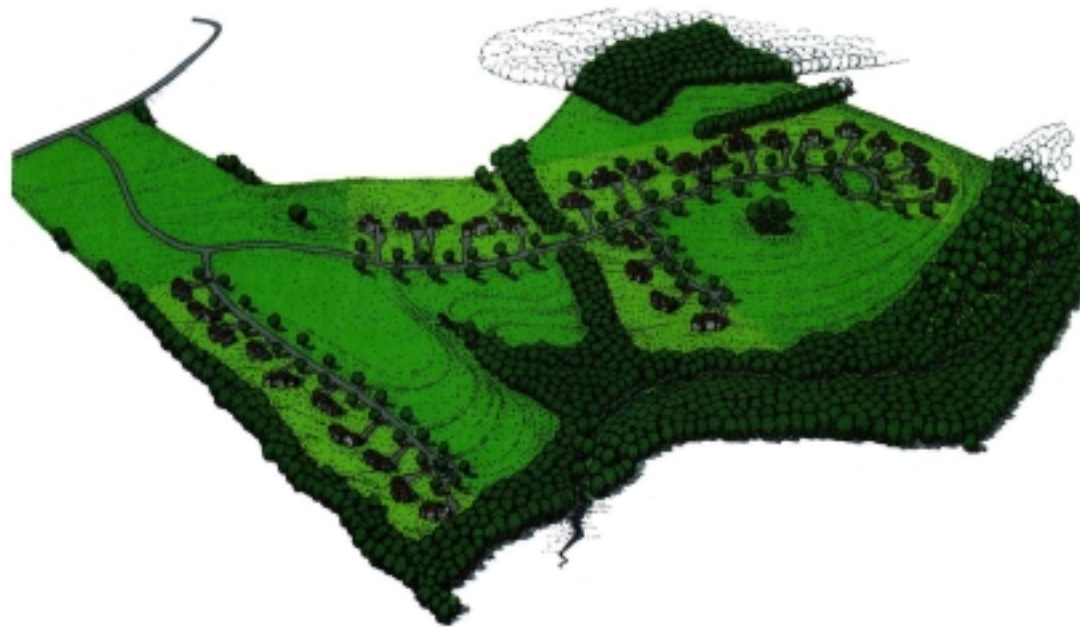
Based upon the delineated primary and secondary conservation areas, potential development zones are identified and lots, roads and trails are placed on the site.



CONSERVATION PLAN

The conservation design still allows the site to be subdivided into 32 lots, which are reduced to approximately one third the size of the lots in the conventional plan. The dimension of lots can be significantly reduced, as owners will benefit from the surrounding vistas across undeveloped land, psychologically extending their "property" into the open space.

The rendering of the conservation design shows how clustered residential development can be situated within permanently protected open space, preserving more of the natural and cultural features of the site than possible under conventional development practices.



WHAT WOULD OPEN SPACE ZONING LOOK LIKE IN GIBSONS?

To illustrate the conservation design process, a site within the Town of Gibsons that is currently undeveloped, but zoned for future residential growth was analyzed according to the principles of open space zoning. Two parcels of land located along the southwest boundary of the Town, locally referred to as Gospel Rock, have been designated as a comprehensive development zone for residential use and parks, recreation and open space. This zoning allows for the establishment of a mixture of housing types, including single-family and ground-oriented multi-family housing, although single-family housing will be the predominant form.

The local topography makes the Gospel Rock property a unique visual and natural feature within Gibsons, as it acts as backdrop of undeveloped open space at the edge of the town. Currently, the site is heavily wooded and difficult to access given the steep slopes; however, the ridge offers panoramic views of the town and across the channel. Similarly, views onto the site from surrounding residential neighbourhoods contribute to the rural, small town characteristic of Gibsons.

The diagrams on the following two pages represent alternative development strategies for the Gospel Rock site.

GOSPEL ROCK YIELD PLAN

The proposed plan for Gospel Rock allows the development of 253 residential units, of which 122 are single-family lots. Although the single-family lots are relatively small, with a minimum lot width of 20m and minimum lot depth of 30m, the resulting land use pattern closely mirrors a typical suburban subdivision. The street pattern and lot alignment create an inward looking subdivision that fails to address the existing community that surrounds the site. In particular, the lots along the western boundary of the site are aligned with their "backs" to the adjacent roadway and neighbouring lots.

The proposed open space is composed almost entirely of lands that are too steep to build on and that are located at the periphery of the development. In addition, public access to the proposed neighbourhood park is limited by its location in the back yards of a few properties.

Existing Proposal for Gospel Rock



USE	MAXIMUM DENSITY (units/ha)	TOTAL AREA (ha)	NUMBER OF UNITS
Single-Family (20m x 30m)	10	12.8	122
Multi-Family	20	3.7	74
Multi-Family	30	1.9	57
Park and Greenway	-	1.8	
Open Space	-	6.3	
Total		26.5	253

GOSPEL ROCK CONSERVATION PLAN

Land savings can be achieved by reducing the lot widths by 5 metres, creating lots that are approximately 15 m by 30 m. The street pattern and lot alignment now creates a neighbourhood that is more responsive to the surrounding community context. The lots along the western boundary of the site have been redesigned to front on to the existing roadway, creating a "face" for the new development.

The open space can be redesigned to better integrate the parks and natural areas into the community. For example, the "backyard park" can be realigned to improve community access to the neighbourhood green space and to create "eyes on the park" from the surrounding lots. Additional park space can also be created to enable access to the viewpoint ridge area of the site. The land saved by reducing lot dimensions has been preserved as open space to maintain some of the natural qualities of the site within the residential neighbourhood.

Open Space Zoning Proposal for Gospel Rock



USE	MAXIMUM DENSITY (units/ha)	TOTAL AREA (ha)	NUMBER OF UNITS
Single-Family (15m x 30m)	12.5	9.9	123
Multi-Family	20	3.7	74
Multi-Family	30	1.9	57
Park and Greenway	-	2.2	
Open Space	-	8.8	
Total		26.5	254

HOW CAN OPEN SPACE ZONING BE IMPLEMENTED?

The open space that is created during this zoning and subdivision process can be permanently protected using a conservation easement managed by a land trust that restricts any future development from occurring. A conservation easement, outlining the type of conservation activities that can occur on the open space, is attached to the title of the land, and continues with each successive owner in perpetuity. The question of ownership and maintenance of the open space can be addressed by a variety of methods. Individual property owners can retain ownership; although it is recommended that at least 20 percent of the open space be dedicated for common use (Arendt, 1999). Alternatively, a local homeowners' association can take on the ownership and maintenance with membership in the association being a condition of the purchase; a potential buyer would be required to sign a legally enforceable agreement, which enables the homeowners' association to collect fees for park and open space maintenance (Arendt, 1992). In some situations, a local government may wish to own a portion of the open space to dedicate it as a community or neighbourhood park; however, the cost of land may limit the ability of municipalities to purchase open space through this process. Ownership by a local homeowners' association has been the most successful method of implementing and managing open space in conservation subdivisions designed and built in the United States. Liability concerns regarding public use of private land can be addressed through the purchase of liability insurance policies, which would protect owners from potential risk.

Open space zoning offers communities environmental, social and economic advantages over conventional practices. Environmental benefits include the preservation of open space that can contain environmentally sensitive areas and fish and wildlife habitat; in addition, a system of open spaces can be used to improve storm water management practices within residential areas. The preservation of open spaces within neighbourhoods adds significant social and recreational benefits to the community as a whole by creating activity areas and linking neighbourhoods along a system of community-wide greenways and trails.

Despite the attractiveness of such environmental and social benefits, the question is often raised of “who is going to pay for all that stuff?” The economics of open space zoning, however, offer financial advantages to developers and landowners that encourage and support the implementation of this alternative strategy. The economic benefits of open space zoning include lower development costs and increased property values. In clustered residential subdivisions, the infrastructure requirements can be reduced as the narrow, small, single-family lots and multi-family housing require shorter road and utility lines per house lot. From a marketing perspective, residential neighbourhoods designed through open space zoning capitalize on the natural amenities that are preserved within the development. This sales technique was successfully used in a conservation subdivision in a Wisconsin development where the potential buyers were enticed by knowing “that when they buy a one-acre lot in one of their conservation subdivisions, they are actually receiving the use of more than 80 acres: their house lot plus 80 acres of woodland, meadows, ponds, trails, and active recreation facilities (tennis courts and ballfields)” (Arendt, 1996). In addition to the market sales advantage, properties within a conservation subdivision tend to appreciate faster than houses in conventional subdivisions. Lacy (1991) compared two subdivisions in Massachusetts that were built at about the same time, with similar houses that originally sold for similar prices; the key differences between the subdivisions were lots sizes and natural amenities. The houses on smaller lots were located in a community with 36 acres of open space, while the houses on larger lots were in a district with little open space. After twenty years, Lacy found that the smaller lots had appreciated to values 13% higher than the properties that were twice their size; the price differential was attributed to the neighbourhood open space.

CONCLUSION

Open space zoning is a method that can be added to the planning “toolbox” of techniques used to help design and build sustainable communities. The ideas presented are meant to encourage and inspire more innovative and creative approaches to residential site planning that will help maintain the small town characteristics of Gibsons. The Gospel Rock conservation site plan was developed to provide an example of how small design changes can significantly improve the quality of the natural spaces that are preserved through the subdivision process. The example, however, was based upon very limited knowledge of the true special features of the site, and could be built upon through a community participation and public consultation process that could result in the compilation of a more comprehensive community inventory. The open space zoning and conservation design process offering environmental, social and economic benefits, is creative method of preserving natural areas while accommodating demand for growth. Gibsons is a community that is expected to grow and in order to accommodate the demand, while maintaining the special small town characteristics of the community alternative development practices need to be considered. Development does not have to mean negative change, but rather can be embraced and managed as a means of strengthening and even improving the existing features of a community. “The idea of using development as an engine to protect open space, strengthen communities, reduce automobile use and even restore damaged ecosystems is an exciting one...” (Wilson, 1998).

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