

## Natural Assets

A growing number of developers believe in preserving natural resources and finding ways to develop an area without destroying it.

BY JUDY LIEBNER  
Special to the Free Press

Gordon Thompson believed new home buyers could co-exist comfortably with nature when he began developing a subdivision beside the Medway Valley in 1991. So far, his hypothesis has proven correct.

Thompson is president of Corlon Properties, which is developing the Neighbourhoods of Sunningdale, an upscale community of single-family homes and condos in northwest London. Bounded by Wonderland and Fanshawe Park roads, the 400-acre site surrounds the Medway Valley and Sunningdale Golf and Country Club.

Thompson says it was imperative to him that the new development not adversely impact the Medway Valley. Phase One, which is currently under development, has 226 single-family homes and 200 condo units.

“What we were trying to achieve was a compatible development that would allow the residents who live close to the valley and throughout the neighbourhood to preserve and enjoy the natural habitat that’s there,” Thompson says.

Thompson has a personal connection to the land; his grandfather, J. Gordon Thompson, purchased it in the 1930s and ‘60s and built the golf club in 1934. The environmentally sensitive area (ESA) contains a maple and beech forest, the Medway Creek and steep ravines. Thompson says the lots closest to the valley were the first to be sold, underscoring his belief that nature attracts home buyers.

Corlon has created buffer zones to protect the edges of the valley from the residential areas and allow the forest to expand outwards. While some small woodlots had to be removed to make way for homes, healthy trees – including sugar maple, white ash and black walnut – were transplanted into the buffer zones; others were carefully protected during the construction phase.

The development’s stormwater management pond is another significant environmental feature. It filters sediment, contaminants and runoff through the wetland and helps to ensure that the quality of water entering the Medway Creek, a tributary of the Thames River, remains high.

The pond and its landscaping were designed to recreate a natural environment with native aquatic plants. “Even though it’s relatively new, there’s already quite a bit of aquatic life and birds have started to use the habitat that was created,” Thompson says. “Over time, it will be largely indistinguishable from the ESA adjacent to it.”

Thompson is part of a growing number of developers who believe in preserving natural resources as part of their business ethic. While taking economic viability into account, many are trying to find ways to develop an area without destroying its natural assets.

Community associations also act as bridge between residents and developers during the planning process.

Gloria McGinn-McTeer, past chair of the Urban League of London, says London is fortunate to have several developers who try to reduce the negative effects of development; many view it as an extension of their business responsibility.

She believes it’s critical for developers to engage the community, listen to residents’

concerns and incorporate their desires into their vision for a new development. Demonstrating a regard for the community and the environment can be achieved without involving the Ontario Municipal Board.

“There is no perfect development that deals with all the environmental aspects,” McGinn-McTeer says. “You’re just trying to minimize the effects of development on significant wetland areas. There are some developers who get that right away and engage the community proactively.”

David Tennant, president of The Hampton Group, says many developers are making a greater effort to work with existing neighbourhood residents on environmental issues.

“There are other things we can do rather than just going in and clear-cutting a woodlot. I don’t think that’s acceptable to the public anymore.”

Tennant, a developer, worked closely with residents to decide the fate of a woodlot during the development of Egelton Woods, a 400-lot subdivision in Hyde Park. Although the woodlot wasn’t a provincially designated ESA, and had accumulated garbage from parties held there over the years, it was important to the area’s existing residents.

Tennant decided to give the woodlot to the municipality as the best way to protect it. The Hampton Group also funded a clean-up, with the assistance of high school students and a community committee.

“I think developers have to have a level of sensitivity. To the extent that they can, they should be attempting to meet the reasonable requests and desires of existing neighbours,” Tennant says.

As an alternative to building in the woodlot, Tennant created two cul-de-sacs at each end. Not surprisingly, buyers of those lots were willing to pay a premium to overlook mature trees.

In Hunt Club West, which The Hampton Group is also developing, the Kains Woods are a particularly valuable environmental asset. Tennant decided to give his company’s portion of the woods to the municipality and accepted a setback change and the loss of two lots to observe the limits of the ESA.

For both developments – Egelton Woods and Hunt Club West – Tennant plans to engage a biologist who will advise residents on how they can live near a woodlot without damaging it. Having residents take responsibility for stewardship of the woods is key to preserving them in the long-term.

“A lot of times, what you have to do is educate people – well-meaning people – who do things to a woodlot that you shouldn’t do,” Tennant notes.

Corlon has also taken steps to ensure homeowners know how to protect the natural resources in the Neighbourhoods of Sunningdale. The company provides new homeowners with a 30-page environmental guide that describes the plants and animals found in the ESA and ways of co-existing with them.

Thompson says it’s important for homeowners to understand the biological diversity of the ESA, with its rare plant, fish and bird species. “It becomes a matter of stewardship for the people who are living closest to it, that they understand what the sensitivities are, what’s there to be protected and how to protect it.”

Doug Stanlake, manager of subdivisions and special projects for the city’s planning department, says developers maximize natural heritage features in different ways. Some orient homes to overlook features, instead of backing onto them. That approach allows the public visual access to valleys, ravines and forests.

“A good development maximizes what it can do for future homeowners and also provides

public access to natural heritage features,” Stanlake says.

Bill De Young, technical advisor for Reforest London, says there’s no doubt that mature trees enhance property values. He would, however, like to see better protection of natural areas and better setbacks to keep development from encroaching on wildlife habitats.

“From the developers’ point of view, they’re trying to maximize the development envelope, but from the natural area side we want to optimize the wildlife corridor movement,” he says.

De Young hopes a sense of corporate-social responsibility will motivate developers to preserve wildlife habitats. The public, too, must be more vocal about protecting natural areas.

“If they (developers) are purchasing the land, they have the right to use the land, but they don’t have the right to do anything they want with it. Society values have to trump private values.”

Business advantages shouldn’t be the only incentive for developers to preserve environmental features, McGinn-McTeer says. “The benefits of a woodlot, as it relates to the removal of carbon dioxide generated by automobiles, are humongous. They need to think of the big picture and, too often, developers are concentrating on their one little piece of development without appreciating the holistic impact.”

Tennant believes advocates for environmental protection and developers have to work together for a common goal. “I’d like to see them work a little more closely together as to how they’ll improve and sustain that woodlot, or that environmental feature.”