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Land Development Seeing Trends Toward Community-Based Agriculture

Judging by the number of community names containing “meadow,” “creek,” “ridge,” and other landscape features, developers clearly understand the importance of connecting people to the land. Some developments also use restored barns or other historic rural elements as community centerpieces to foster a sense of place. A new trend in land development takes this effort one step further.

The local food movement has prompted some developers to incorporate not just farming heritage into their project – but the *actual farm*. Community gardens are springing up everywhere, from suburban lots to urban rooftops, and becoming part of the design for new developments. In some cases, food production is being integrated at the scale of small but fully operational farms. The idea of fresh food and the aesthetics of well-kept fields may be appealing, but successful models are still few and far between.

Imagine some of the lawns in suburbia reallocated to fields of vegetables. Homeowners still get the open space they crave, with the added bonus of fresh and often organically produced food. “Residents loved it,” affirmed Bob Engstrom, developer of Fields of St. Croix in Lake Elmo, Minnesota. Fields was the first conservation development in the state to incorporate a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. CSAs provide a weekly box of produce to neighborhood residents or to local subscribers throughout the growing season.



Photo courtesy of Robert Engstrom Companies

Although the CSA farm at Fields of St. Croix was rolled into a larger farming operation after eight years, Engstrom maintained that this amenity has a future in land development. “Timing is everything,” he said, citing the current explosion in mainstream organic food as a factor likely to promote the success of CSA farms in future projects. Engstrom also emphasized the importance of integrating farming logistics with site design and the need to weigh farm ownership options.

Even in urban and commercial areas, developers are finding ways to incorporate agriculture. An established and often cited example of urban agriculture is Atlanta’s East Lake Commons, in which a multi-family housing development has its own 5-acre certified organic CSA farm. On a larger scale, Vancouver’s Olympic Village is poised to become a laboratory for urban agriculture when the community gets transformed into a high density, mixed-use development after the 2010 Winter Games. Various strategies for local food production, ranging from window boxes to edible landscapes and rooftop gardens, are being incorporated into the design of buildings and grounds.

The direction of any current trend is difficult to predict under today's market conditions. Skeptics of urban farming point out that the concept has come and gone throughout history, from the victory gardens of World War II to the community gardens movement initiated in the 1970's. Only time will tell, though the burgeoning interest in alternative food sources and the consequences of climate change suggest that urban farming may well become a standard amenity in 21st century land development.



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