

On The Value of Trees and Open Space

by Elizabeth Brabec

Trees and open space, whether public parkland or privately owned farmland and recreation areas, are our communities' most precious resources. As with all natural and scenic resources, it is important to conserve them since once gone, they are often lost forever.

Within the world of business and development, the organizing force is the bottom line — how profitable will this business or development be for its investors? The economic bottom line is often used as the reason for opposing conservation regulations, and maximizing the development of land. But there is a growing body of evidence that shows that resource conservation is important to the bottom line of business and development.

Trees perform a variety of functions in the landscape, all of which impact the quality of our lives and our pocketbooks. Trees reduce air pollution by filtering dust out of the air, reduce noise and light pollution, reduce soil erosion and water run off, and aid in climate control. Research has shown that properly placed trees and landscape plantings can save 20 to 25 percent of energy use in the home for both cooling and heating. In fact, without the moderating effect of trees and greenspaces, urban areas grow both hotter and drier — an effect felt by anyone seeking the shade of a tree in mid-summer. [Editor's Note: For more on the value of trees, see "Planning for Trees" by Henry Arnold in Issue 2 of the Journal].

Trees not only affect our living environment, but also have a direct impact on the value of our homes. Numerous studies have shown that people are willing to pay more for homes that are surrounded by trees and other landscaping. How much more? Depending on the area of the country, anywhere from 3 to 18 percent. Even those studies that did not attempt to quantify the increase in value have found that



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the decision to buy a particular house was often swayed by the presence of trees.

What does this mean for developers and new housing developments? New homes with mature trees will sell for more and will sell faster than homes without trees. Although developers often cite in-

creased development costs for preserving existing trees on-site, studies have shown that this additional cost is more than offset by the increased value and marketability of the house.

Municipal tree programs are often the first part of the municipal budget to be cut. Yet trees are the only part of the municipal infrastructure that actually increases in value every year. Trees not only increase in their individual value, but they also add to adjacent property values. This, in turn, leads to increased tax revenues for the municipality — and often to the revitalization of residential and commercial areas.

As with trees, parkland and open space can have a positive impact on the economy of a community by adding to the value of adjacent property. Depending on the region and study parameters, open space has been found to add from 5 to 33 percent to the value of adjacent property. These figures relate to municipally purchased open space, as well as that preserved by greenbelt zoning or by cluster ordinances.

SUMMING UP:

If a community is going to remain economically viable, if it is going to attract long-term residents and businesses, the community must be concerned with its appearance, liveability and “feel.” Protecting community resources — particularly trees and open space — contributes to a positive image for the community, which translates into a sound economic base. ♦

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