

Understanding Open Space Design

Open Space Design (OSD) is an alternative approach to residential land development to the two typical patterns in towns like Shutesbury—ANR and subdivision. ANR (short for “approval not required”) is the most common, involving the creation of road-front building lots along existing public roadways. As long as there is sufficient road frontage (presently, 250 feet) and area (presently, 90,000 square feet) for each one, new building lots for single-family dwellings may be created this way. As the existing frontage is used up, more must be created. That is when larger development projects begin to extend farther back off of existing roadways requiring new roadways to create the new frontage for more building lots—a process called subdivision.

The need for road frontage drives both processes. The availability of frontage is generally the limiting factor on a parcel’s developability (e.g., number of new building lots or dwellings possible). In a subdivision, the expected number of building lots is directly proportional to how much new roadway can be built; hence, subdivisions are often characterized by lengthy road networks extending to the far reaches of a parcel. Both of these typical development methods do not include a land conservation component; the end result of each is the conversion of all undeveloped land to houselots and streets.

OSD on the other hand does contain a conservation component, ensuring that every new development project that otherwise would be a conventional subdivision will result in the permanent preservation of at least 65-80% of the land as open space. The limiting factor on developability is land area, not road frontage, which is a key difference. The amount of land in an OSD project, rather than the length of road one can construct, determines the maximum number of dwellings that may be built. With basic mapped information the number of dwelling units, the acres of open space required, and the developable acres can quickly be calculated (see the Open Space Design Worksheet). Additional dwelling units may be added though either density bonuses or transfers of development rights from other parcels. A Conservation Analysis process then assists the landowner and Planning Board to find suitable locations for the homes while preserving the most significant natural resources on the site.

Within the developable areas much greater design flexibility is offered than at present. For example, there are no specified lot size or frontage requirements, and property-line setbacks are reduced. Access to the dwellings is possible over a lot’s own frontage or by way of a shared driveway serving up to six dwellings. The dwelling units may be proposed as any combination of one- to four-family structures, and may be integrated with the open space and any trail networks on the property. Because the developed areas are more compact and served by significantly less roadway, environmental impacts are minimized while keeping the costs of construction down. Various ownership options exist for the open space, including retention by the original owner. In addition to their ecological benefits, possible open space uses are those typical in Shutesbury today, including forestry, agriculture, and recreation.

In the proposed new zoning bylaw OSD replaces conventional subdivision as the preferred development type. Any zoning bylaw, including the current one, will affect various properties differently. Comparing the effects of the proposed bylaw on developability between OSD and conventional subdivision is difficult because of the dissimilar methods involved (frontage- vs. area-based), almost like “apples to oranges.” To help answer these questions the Planning Board has worked with several dozen interested landowners over the last year to assess the effects of the new zoning proposal on their properties in Shutesbury. In the cases analyzed thus far three results were repeatedly found: 1) the same or a modest increase in the possible number of dwelling units; 2) more options for creative and efficient design layout; and 3) conservation of 70-80% of the land.