

Municipalities

Local units of government are beginning to discover that low-impact development techniques and conservation design alternatives can enhance quality of life and economic vitality in their communities.

Alternative approaches to land development require close collaboration between landowners, developers, and government agencies. However, local ordinances and policies typically do not provide the kind of flexibility required for this type of collaboration.

Don Berger, MPCA Sustainable Development State Program Administrator, says ordinances should reflect the values and guiding principles of a community's comprehensive plan. They should be a clearly articulated and prioritized set of guidelines, goals, objectives and expectations. He cautions however that ordinances alone won't necessarily help communities accomplish their goals. He offers the following advice.

There is no such thing as a perfect ordinance.

Community planners might find it more helpful to ask themselves the following question: "What kind of ordinance can we put in place that will accomplish the performance goals we expect without being so overly defined that they can't be understood or used by the average person?"

Eliminate limiting factors or restrictive conditions.

Devise ways to overcome existing rules and policies that create barriers to low-impact development. Typical barriers include ordinances or state codes regarding minimum street width, lot size, parking spaces, etc.

Provide incentives to encourage conservation design.

Incentives are often the best tool municipalities have to engage landowners and developers in doing something different. There must be an economic benefit: either increased profit or reduced cost, or both.

Provide clear objectives where appropriate.

For example, if establishing water quality performance objectives, make them as specific as possible so they are measurable. If preserving land space is an objective, provide specific measures for what constitutes preserved space, like leaving 25% of a site in its undeveloped, natural state.

Allow flexibility.

Flexibility is particularly important in the area of site design, where differences in regional geology, hydrology or general site-specific characteristics should dictate the best development plan and not the ordinance.