

## **Audubon Society - most recent report on conservation**

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By Aaron Wasserman/Daily News staff

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Development has slowed dramatically everywhere the past three years, but even before that, the state's rate of preserving open space outpaced the rate at which new land was being developed.

Between 1999 and 2005, the equivalent of 43 acres per day were preserved in the Bay State, compared to 22 acres taken for development each day, said the Massachusetts Audubon Society in its most recent report on conservation. It's the first time since the organization started publishing the "Losing Ground" series in 1987 that land conservation outpaced development.

At the same, though, houses only grew bigger, reaching an average of about 2,700 square feet, while agricultural land continued to fade. There are 215 Massachusetts towns with less than 5 percent of agricultural land, the report says.

Considering the recession emanated from a collapsed housing market, typified by large houses in subdivisions, the possibility that development will look different once the market revives looms on planners' horizon. Predicting any change is difficult, a balance between what land-use policy encourages and what the market says developers want to build and people want to live in.

"When we get out of this slump and the housing market and commercial real estate market turn around - and they will turn around - I'm afraid we're going to see once again a dramatic uptick in the conversion of green space into developed land," said Marc Draisen, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council's executive director.

"There hasn't been a wholesale change in local zoning ordinances or in state policy to encourage a slower development of green space."

Local zoning laws requiring houses be built on at least an acre of land, conceived to keep a town rural, have the opposite effect, planners said. The greatest number of houses built from 1999 to 2005 was in towns predominately zoned for lots between one and two acres, the report said.

"With the tradition of one-to-two-acre zoning we see in many communities throughout Massachusetts, it results in a divide or fragmentation of the landscape, and a spreading out over the town of individual houses on large lots," said Jack Clarke, the Audubon Society's director of public policy and government relations.

"That consumes more energy and open space and requires more infrastructure, pipes, roads, electrical lines, as opposed to if there were a more dense development that has less impact on the overall environment," he said.

With the current slowdown, Clarke said towns have the chance to reassess their development strategies, "look at where we develop land and figure out how we should proceed once we pick up again."

Several MetroWest towns, including Ashland, Franklin, Medway and Hopkinton, were among the top-20 towns with the fastest growth rate those six years, based on the acres of development per square mile.

Planners in those towns said they have zoning bylaws to encourage clustered development, which means houses are built closer together in a subdivision so more land is untouched.

"The ideal situation is to intensify development in smaller areas so there are more acres to permanently protect. That's the way the planning world is thinking right now," said Bryan Taberner, Franklin's planning director. "But you also have the economics of it, and a person has the right to develop their land and there are a lot of issues at play."

Taberner said he thinks the size of houses will plateau because "as we know, a lot of people over-bought and a lot of people are going to be looking to sell and get into something smaller."

Natick's community development director, Patrick Reffett, also said he expects house sizes to decrease. The pressure in town for one-acre lots has subsided as officials try to guide more development around downtown.

"I think there's going to be a push toward cost-consciousness," he said. "Our price points have been high and higher, and it's important to get a diversity of products out there that people in the community or people who want to invest in the community have an ability to afford."

Elaine Lazarus, Hopkinton planning director, said building trends depend on demand and "builders respond to the market and what they think people want."

Draisen said each market crisis has a lesson attached and he believes the development trend is swinging toward more concentrated, smaller homes.

"I don't know if it's going to turn around completely, but my hope is it's going to," he said, adding, "We do see a start of encouraging this kind of development, but it needs to be taken more seriously and more aggressively."

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