

# PRAIRIE CROSSING

CREATING AN AMERICAN  
CONSERVATION  
COMMUNITY

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# Creating Ecological Value Through Development

“Conservation development is a practice of land use, planning, and community design that strives to maintain a respectful relationship with nature.”

—Edward McMahon

Prairie Crossing is a for-profit derivative of the traditional land trust concept, a free-market attempt to restore and preserve environmentally sensitive land.

- Located in Grayslake, Illinois, 40 miles north of Chicago
- Open for initial occupation in 1994
- Developed on 677 acres of degraded, century-old farmland
- 359 single-family homes and 36 condominiums
- Homes cluster on just 135 acres
- 69 percent of total land area is permanently preserved as open space by HOA
- Open space is ecologically restored wetlands and prairie grasslands
- \$100 million project

# Not All Conservation Communities Are The Same, But They Often Include:

- Making money and generating profits
- Green construction technology
- Renewable energy
- Sustainable agriculture
- Public transit
- Protection and preservation of land and resources
- Restoration or enhancement of degraded environments
- Innovative use of space and density
- Private governments

# Saving The Land By Developing It As A Remedy For The Great Green Divide

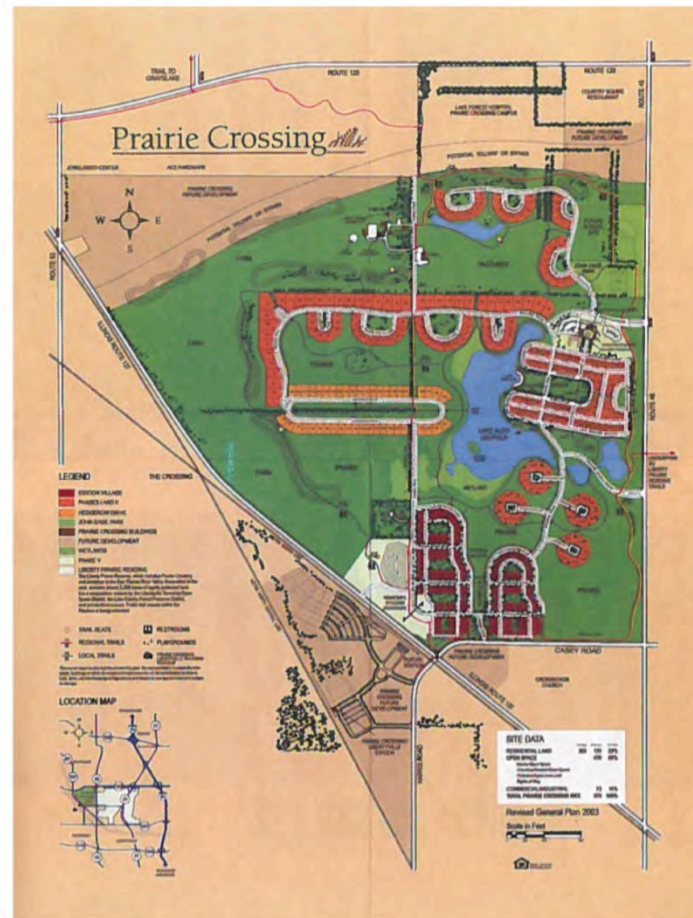
“[A] Republican is supposed to be anti-environmental , and . . . if you care about protecting the environment, You must be a Democrat.”

—Martha Marks, Illinois Republican and Founder of  
Republicans For Environmental Protection

# Two Contrasting Models Of Environmental Protection

- Land advocacy (e.g., Sierra Club)
- Land Trusts (e.g., Nature Conservancy)

# Map of Prairie Crossing



MAP 1. Prairie Crossing site plan. The diagram does not include the Station Square and Station Village condominiums. Courtesy of Prairie Holdings Corporation. Reprinted with permission from Vicky Ranney.





PLATE 14. Hiking path near Station Village and Square. Note the variety of housing colors, a departure from industry standards of the time. Photographer: Maryanne Natarajan.



PLATE 15. Prairie Crossing's developers tried to re-create the yesteryear small-town charm absent from many suburban-sprawls



PLATE 13. Open-space prairie restoration.  
Photographer: Maryanne Natarajan.

# Creative Urban Policy Response To Urban Sprawl

- Focus on:
- Creation of sense of place
- Creation of sense of community
- Restoration of extirpated prairie grassland ecosystem
- Careful attention to infrastructure

# Guiding Principles

- 1. Environmental protection and enhancement
- 2. A healthy lifestyle
- 3. A sense of place
- 4. A sense of community
- 5. Economic and racial diversity
- 6. Convenient and efficient transportation
- 7. Energy conservation
- 8. Lifelong learning and education
- 9. Aesthetic design and high-quality construction
- 10. Economic viability

# Developers Seek Something New

- Environmental enhancement
- Grand vision: Liberty Prairie Reserve

# Developers Seek To Revive The Old

- Frederick Law Olmsted and the restorative power of the landscape
- Leopold's Land Ethic: Changing the Culture
- Truman's Show: Seaside Institute and the LPF

# Conventional Development Harms The Environment

- Destroys habitats of all kinds, particularly wetlands
- Sea of suburbia: fragmentation and island biogeography
- Invasive species: numbers 49 and 82
- Saving biodiversity: preserving, protecting, and connecting



# Island Biogeography

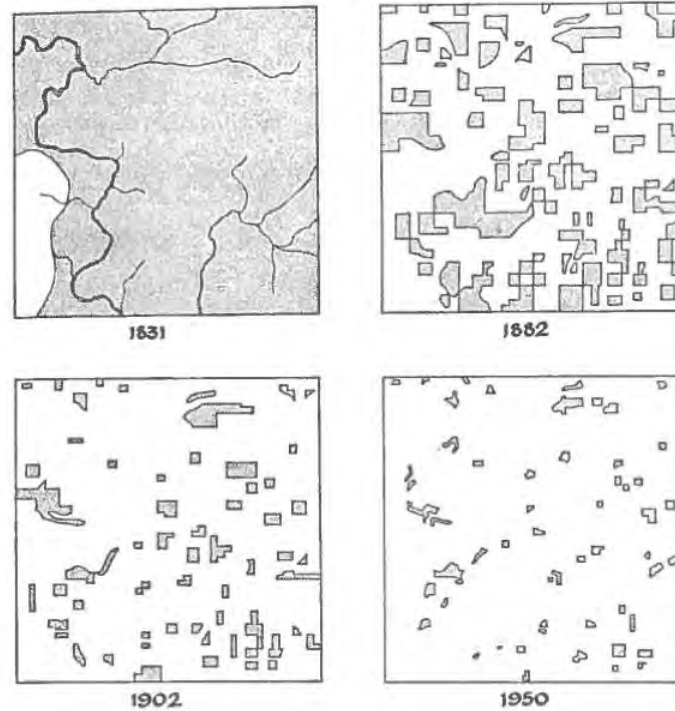


FIGURE 3. Habitat fragmentation in Green County, Wisconsin, 1831–1950. Shaded areas represent woodland habitat. Courtesy of John Curtis. Reprinted with permission from University of Chicago, copyright 1956.



# The Rodney Dangerfield of Ecosystems: Prairie and Oak Savanna

- Illinois: From 22 million to 2,000 acres
- Chicago: 5.14 acres of virgin prairie survive
- Iowa: Less than a tenth of a percent
- North America: Tenth of a percent
- Prairie ecosystem more endangered than tropical rainforest

# Prairie Burn

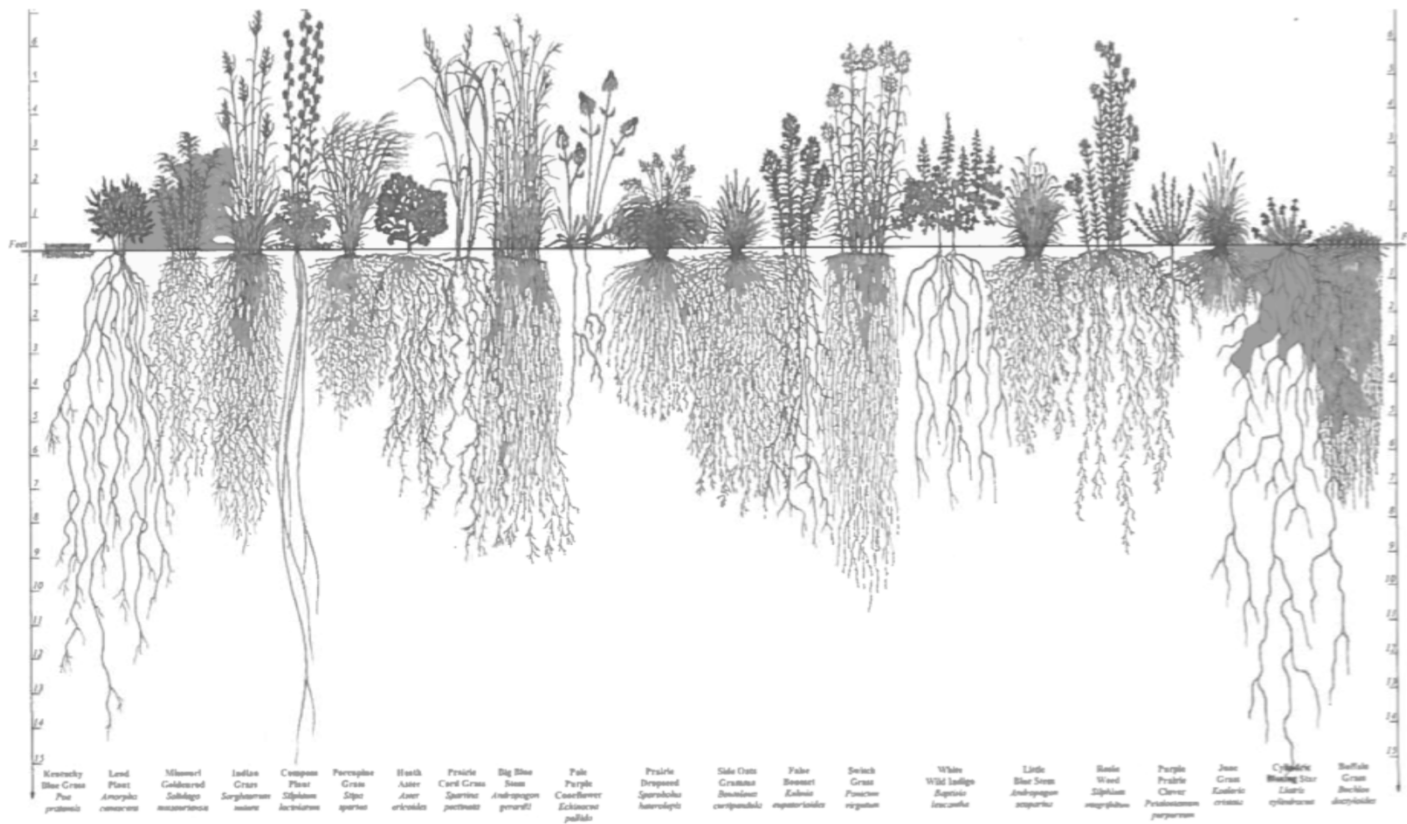


PLATE II. Fall prairie burn. Photographer: Maryanne Natarajan.

# Value Of Prairie

- Flood control: 12,000 gallons per acre
- Plant blindness
- Water filtration and purification
- Carbon sequestration
- Rich ecological niches for wildlife

# Root Systems Of Prairie Plants



Root Systems of Prairie Plants

Living Habitats

© 1992

# Changing the Culture

- “These buyers are trying to keep up with the Joneses. We are trying to change what the Joneses are doing.”

—Michael Sands

# Tyranny of Small Decisions

Environmental problems are often the cumulative result of seemingly insignificant private choices made by individuals.



# Resident Survey

- Self-reporting environmental awareness: 84 percent local/58 percent national
- Self-reporting environmental activism: Community moved from “inactive – occasional” to “occasional – active”
- Recycling, composting, reduced consumption
- 39 percent chose 70/30 meadow/turf landscaping
- Culture of transportation convenience still strong

# A Geography of Somewhere

“You can’t know who you are until you know where you are.”

—Wendell Berry

“Nature is not a place to visit. It is home.”

—Gary Snyder

“The geography of nowhere.”

—James Kunstler



PLATE 2. Three young residents catching frogs and interacting with nature in the re-created wetlands. Photographer: Maryanne Natarajan.



PLATE 17. Farmhouse homes with views of wetlands and prairie.  
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PLATE 16. Great blue heron fishing in Prairie Crossing's re-created wetlands. The community anchors the northwest corner of the Liberty Prairie Reserve, a 5,770-acre public-private partnership designed to preserve and protect prairie grassland habitat and agricultural land. Photographer: Maryanne Natarajan.



PLATE 12. Prairie Crossing hiking path, with Sanctuary Pond and horse stables in background. Photographer: Maryanne Natarajan.



PLATE 20. Native prairie plant diversity near Lake Leopold. Note towering prairie dock forb (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*) and eastern bluebird nesting box in middle foreground. Photographer: John Watson.



PLATE 19. Prairie Crossing Charter School with student bicycles.  
Photographer: John Watson.



# Creation Of Sense Of Place And Community

- New Urbanism: front porches, rear garages, limestone footpaths, clustered housing
- Community buildings: PCCS schoolhouse and Colby Barn
- Educational seminars, newsletter, PCCS
- Prairie burns, Prairie Patrol, farm, garden, horse stables, trails, nest boxes, nature
- Resident committees and emphasis on community from sales pitch
- Biggest failure: Economic and racial diversity: 90 percent W, 5 percent A, 3 percent H, 2 percent B; Income: Mean: \$134,700, Median: \$127,500 (2006 dollars)

# Civic Participation

- PC residents excelled in areas of nontraditional political participation
- Residents voted at the rates of their collective demographics (e.g., education, income, age)
- 2004 defeat of incumbent Phil Crane, anti-environmental Republican
- Running for Office: IL state representative (62), IL state Senate (31), Lake County Board, Lake County Forest Preserve District, 3 local school boards, Grayslake Village Board, Grayslake Library Board, Grayslake Park District, Central Lake County Joint Action Water Agency

# Nature's Suburb

## Sobering Statistics:

- From 1981 to 2003, 23 percent of Earth's surface area experienced a decline in ecosystem function/productivity
- 83 percent of ice-free continental landmass is directly influenced by human activity
- 75 percent of that landmass is no longer "wild" using scientific criteria
- Human degradation of the planet measured by surface area estimated to be 43 percent in 1995

Can 7 billion people live like this?

No, but that is the wrong question on a domesticated planet.

# The Future Is Now

Two-thirds of the development expected to exist in the U.S. in 2050 is not yet built.

# Integrating the Citizen Into Nature

“The trouble with wilderness is . . . the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. . . . This, then, is the central paradox: Wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not.”

—William Cronon

Conservation communities are an opportunity to not only develop in relative concert with the environment, but also to integrate the citizen back into nature.

# Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson

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