



## Natural Directions for Resort Development

The current levels of development in this country and the public's renewed interest in sustainability have provided the resort industry with a new opportunity. Resorts with equestrian amenities can offer developers an excellent return on investment and provide a natural and sustainable environment that many of today's resort guests seek.

Historically, economic development and conservation have been at odds. Since 2000, according to the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource (ELCR), 13 million acres of rural land have been converted into subdivisions, shopping malls, workplaces, roads, parking lots, and resorts. That's more than the land mass of Rhode Island, Delaware, Connecticut, and New Jersey combined. From a purely conservationist view, this is not welcome news. But given the recent population growth—the United States passed the 300 million mark this year—this would be expected. The economic principle of supply and demand has thus put pressure on regions for increased development. To relax and get away from build-up in their everyday home areas, people are looking to more natural and undeveloped space for their vacation and recreational activities.

Thanks to a blend of technological advances, implementation of new sustainability principles, and a market demand for more eco-friendly development, new answers are surfacing to a growing question: How do we engage in recreational activities and still remain good stewards of the land and its resources?

Many builders and developers are embracing the growing demand for sustainable designs through a new market, the equestrian amenity. Through vi-

sion, effective planning, and leadership, more building industry members are seeing that conservation and development can be managed and transformed by this feature. Equestrian amenities take the natural environment and make it maximally useful to all parties—the developer, builder, and the resort guest.

### Natural and Still Profitable

For one, the building industry will find that many jurisdictions consider the equestrian amenity portion of the overall resort as an "agricultural use." This designation can provide tax and building-density benefits. One example of this is the ability to use areas designated as "open space" for horse pasture. Similarly, acreage allocated to the equestrian amenity often is not included in developed-area calculations. Both of these examples allow "greater" development to take place on constrained properties, making them more profitable.

Through the sustainable practices that naturally evolve in this kind of land use, many developers have found increased public support and acceptance. These practices include reserving large tracts of open space for pasture and cross country courses, as well as creating and maintaining quality trails for riding. Wildlife corridors, proper pasture rest and rotation practices, water reclamation, erosion, and run-off management are all part of the culture of sustainability required to plan this amenity. This process also requires less earth-moving and other "land manipulation" techniques than you'd typically see with other large-scale recreational amenities. Developers will find significantly less tree removal is required and far fewer chemicals are

needed to maintain an equestrian amenity than a golf course, for instance. Other sustainable practices, including the use of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)\* certified designs and LEED-certified or recycled materials, also are often considered in this kind of community design. Fencing, stall and aisle flooring, and barn siding are all available in these same kind of green options.

### Market Demand?

There are about 4 million people in the United States affiliated in some way with the equestrian life as volunteers, owners, or riders—this is one of the five fastest growing leisure activities. They will most likely also want to pursue these types of activities while on vacation. Perhaps resorts can offer an even more expanded program than what's possible in their home areas, given more dense development's limiting effects. Use of this same land for other recreational options, such as hiking or bird-watching or sight-seeing, is also an added benefit.

Developers and resort owners may want to pursue this great land-use option, as a recreational amenity that fits into today's sustainability concepts and also provides beautiful open spaces that define a peaceful vacation. ■

\*The LEED Green Building Rating System™ is the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction, and operation of high performance green buildings.

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