

Master-Planned/Mixed Use Development: A Model for Success Rental Housing: Encouraging New Production

Fostering the creation of sustainable communities with a mix of market and affordable homes, sound infrastructure, transportation options, and employment opportunities for residents while balancing the needs of the community takes vision, time, commitment and diverse partnerships. When part of a master planning process, results can be impressive and can serve as models for success for others to emulate. One recent development in Rhode Island responds to local needs, protects community character and provides safe, affordable homes and commercial space as part of a ‘big-picture’ plan that included input from municipal officials, community partners, funders and residents. The community stands as a model for sound planning, employment of smart growth principles, and enhancement of the natural and built environments.

Case Study – Sandywoods Farm

Sandywoods Farm in Tiverton, Rhode Island is a creative response to the growing need for affordable homes that also recognizes and conserves valuable rural open space, which in a small state is at a premium. The goal was to create compact development, well-designed buildings and landscapes within a highly livable, walkable and intimate neighborhood for residents. The creation of attractive, street-oriented housing types that appeal to renters as well as market-rate buyers, while also meeting the municipality’s commitment to affordable homes, has been achieved through creative allocation of funds and strong partnerships. Additionally, the conservation of undeveloped, agricultural land is in-line with our state’s efforts to reduce sprawl and direct growth away from undeveloped, natural resources.

Sandywoods Farms has created a community which combines a healthy environment and smart, sustainable infrastructure with attractive homes and job opportunities with beautiful designs that preserve the character of the town. The plan for this affordable community was inspired by historic examples and regional precedents from rural New England and speaks to the vernacular character of the community and region. Situated on the site of an existing farm in Tiverton, Rhode Island – the project compactly organizes rural housing around the perimeter of a larger agricultural preserve that will be partially utilized by the residents in conjunction with a resident farmer. Work produced by the residents and agricultural products from the surrounding farm will be showcased in the public market and gallery spaces for artisans designed at the entrance to the community. This activity will be organized around a public square for the benefit of the residents as well as the surrounding community. Adjacent to the site are a new Town Library and ball fields further integrating Sandywoods Farm into the larger community.

Details

The Sandywoods Farm Plan is comprised of four components:

- 20 acres for 50 rental homes and related community facilities, including a community building and studio/gallery space on the first floor of three buildings with residential units above;
- 24 single family house lots will occupy an additional 12 acres of the site. Two of these lots will be sold through the local CDC’s Land Trust program, which allows first-time homebuyers to purchase the house without the land, saving considerable cost;
- approximately 29 acres of the site will be used for farm land and will include a home for a resident farmer;
- the remaining 111 acres will be dedicated to open space in perpetuity.

This unique arts and agricultural community is designed to combine affordable and market rate housing with a working farm and produce market, as well as studio, gallery, and performing space for artists, a multi-use approach that fosters a sense of common purpose. The rental homes will be available to all members of the community, not only artists, which will help to ensure and maintain a diverse constituency. The development

will preserve 150 acres of land for a working farm, open space and an economic development/commercial component focused on artists and agriculture.

Alignment with Municipal Planning Priorities

This innovative development preserves the rural character of the town while providing homes that working families can afford, all within a vibrant community. Sandywoods Farm is aligned with Town objectives to expand opportunities and preserve Tiverton's rural character. A retail- and arts-oriented section of the town already capitalizes on the strong relationship between the town's rural New England character and its artistic proclivities. However, artists often are challenged by the high cost of space for both living and working, which is why many (typically urban) communities have arts overlay districts with relaxed zoning regulations and tax incentives to encourage artists. As part of the goal to preserve open space and reduce sprawl, the Tiverton Land Trust has acquired approximately 94 acres of the original farm site.

Building on Community Character

Sandywoods Farm combines farming activities with housing for working families, as well as commercial space to sell farm products and galleries for art exhibitions. The design of the development and individual buildings on the site draws from rural Tiverton's historic designs, but adds modern building techniques. The site design introduces small-scale walkability while preserving the site's strong relationship between farmland and living space. Homes are clustered along a series of rural lanes with small community gardens interspersed within the site to reflect the adjacent agricultural pastureland.

Environmentally Sensitive Design

Sandywoods Farm seeks to minimize environmental impact through the use of environmentally sensitive materials and building techniques and by limiting development to a small portion of the overall site. In addition to high efficiency heat pump systems, and energy star appliances and light fixtures, a single wind turbine will be installed. All of the rental cottages will be powered by the wind turbine, which is expected to generate enough power to support 70 percent of the community's utility needs, including heat. The integration of a wind turbine will reduce living costs for residents while offering an environmentally conscious housing choice in Rhode Island. The wind turbine will reduce utility costs for the development, allowing the developer to leverage higher NOI to support additional debt to meet the project's financial needs. The use of alternative power sources further protects the environment while lowering cost-of-living for residents. Additionally, the design incorporates structural insulated panes, cellulose insulation and windows and overhangs that will help heat and cool the interiors.

Sandywoods also features the following sustainable solutions to keep costs down for residents: High efficiency framing techniques; Structural insulated panels; Low-e windows; Passive solar techniques, including climate appropriate overhangs, solar gain materials and south rooms; Low/dual flush toilets; and High efficiency combination oil fired burner/backup hot water.

A True 'Model' for Development

Sandywoods Farm has been recognized by both the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU) (2007 Annual Award recipient) and the Rhode Island chapter of the American Planning Association (APA) (2009 Annual Award recipient). The CNU award was given for land protection and affordable housing development, cited as an excellent example of 'rural urbanism.' Sandywoods Farm was selected as the recipient of the RI APA's 'Award for Mixed Use' development as a unique, sustainable development concept combining agricultural uses, the arts, open space preservation and housing choices. Additionally, the development has been selected as a finalist in the Affordable Housing Finance Readers' Choice awards program. Local media outlets have provided extensive coverage (*see attachments*) of the development and the historic preservation community has featured it in their annual conference.

Critical Funding Sources

Sandywoods Farm makes use of a variety of subsidies to provide the affordable units, including a density bonus, HOME funds, CDBG funds, state funding and Tax Credit Exchange funding. Sandywoods has also responded to the challenges of today's housing and economic crises, through an innovative and creative financing package. Affordability is made possible by the development team's ability to respond to changes in the syndication market for Housing Tax Credits and their strategic use of funding sources. Construction had been expected to begin in 2008 with multiple streams of financing cobbled together by the nonprofit developer. When the syndication market contracted as a result of the downturn in the real estate and financial markets, the state housing agency stepped in to fill the breach, stitching together a new financial plan.

The project sponsor returned their previously allocated housing tax credits, applied for and was awarded Tax Credit Exchange Program (TCEP) funds authorized through the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act of 2009 to insure project feasibility. Additionally, creative partnerships have resulted in the infusion of additional support and funding from the non-profit community and other funding sources, including the Rhode Island Housing Resources Commission, the Rhode Island Foundation, the Tiverton Land Trust, Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston, BankNewport, Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the Rhode Island Economic Development Corp. The Tiverton Land Trust, with grants from the state Department of Environmental Management and the Nature Conservancy, bought the development rights to 96 acres in support of the development's goal of land conservation.

Affordability

Maximum income levels for tenants at Sandywoods are: \$41,000 for a family of one; \$46,800 for a family of two; \$52,000 for a family of three; and \$58,000 for a family of four. With rents ranging from \$685 a month for a one-bedroom apartment, \$822 a month for two bedrooms, to \$1,142 a month for a three-bedroom unit, rents are far below the average monthly rents in town. Ten of the rental homes are for households at 60%-80% of AMI; 25 of these homes have Project-Based Section 8.

Sandywoods not only works to meet the conservation goals of the town and state, it also introduces desperately-needed affordable housing units in the town in order to meet the 10% threshold established by the State's Low and Moderate Income Housing Act.

The Result

The concept – that housing is more than four walls and a roof, it is the people within and community outside – comes to life through this model for development. Safe, healthy homes are increasingly beyond the reach of many Rhode Islanders, especially those with low to moderate incomes. Sandywoods provides not only four walls and a roof, but a comprehensive, sustainable community where people can live, work and play. The development is a welcome response to an affordable housing crisis that has been exacerbated by the economic and housing downturns of the past two years. The development illustrates the concept that successful housing policy must focus on building an entire community and not just individual structures.

As a result of the big picture planning and vision for this community, Sandywoods Farm not only provides a place to live, it provides additional opportunities for the people who call it home. When complete, this new community will feature small, community gardens; art studio space for resident use and community; and a commercial village center – consisting of a farmer's market, café, art gallery and bed and breakfast facilities – all encouraging residents to buy and sell their goods locally. In addition, Sandywoods Farm is located near a bike path, bus routes, athletic fields and the site of the new Town Library.

Through thoughtful design and utilization of sustainable building practices, the homes are not only affordable, but they are environmentally sensitive and will keep heating and utility costs down for residents. Additionally, they provide homes to individuals and families as well as economic development/commercial components focused on artists and agriculture.