



## Article 48

Feature article from *Watershed Protection Techniques*. 3(2): 657-660

# Changing Development Rules in Your Community

With urbanization, the composition of the landscape dramatically shifts away from forests, meadows, pastures, crop lands, and wetlands to hard, impervious surfaces such as roads, roofs, parking lots, sidewalks, and driveways. Numerous watershed studies have documented the negative impact that impervious cover has on the quality of aquatic systems. Consequently, communities striving for sustainable development (i.e., economic growth that also protects local streams and habitat) are faced with a difficult challenge.

Communities often find that their existing development codes and ordinances conflict with the goal of sustainable development. Many local codes and ordinances require excessive impervious cover in the form of wide streets, expansive parking lots, and large-lot subdivisions, making preservation of the natural environment difficult. In addition, the economic incentives for developers to conserve natural areas are generally few and far between.

Many communities are choosing to reevaluate their local codes and ordinances with the goal of sustainable development in mind. One of the most effective ways of reforming development rules is through a local site planning roundtable. A local site planning roundtable brings together a diverse cross-section of key players from the local government, development, and environmental communities. Though a consensus process, these stakeholders can hammer out the development rules best suited to achieving sustainable development in the context of local conditions.

When assembling the roundtable membership, it is particularly important to get every local agency with development review authority to actively participate in the roundtable process. It is equally important to involve elected officials in the process, as they must ultimately vote to adopt the proposed changes. Table 1 lists potential members of a local site planning roundtable.

The primary tasks of the local roundtable are to identify existing development rules, compare them to the principles of better site design, determine if changes can or should be made to current codes and ordinances, and finally, negotiate and reach consensus on what the changes should be. To facilitate this analysis, the Center has developed a Codes and Ordinances Worksheet (COW) to help communities evaluate their development rules in the context of better site design principles.

### Anatomy of a COW

The COW allows communities to systematically compare their local development rules to the better site design principles discussed in the first feature article. The COW asks specific questions to elicit basic information about how development actually happens in the community, and can be thought of as an “audit” of the existing codes and ordinances.

The COW uses a scoring system to measure a community’s general ability to support environmentally sensitive development, with points assigned based on how well current community development rules support the principles of better site design. Point

**Table 1: Potential Members of a Local Site Planning Roundtable**

Planning Agency or Commission	Engineering Consultants
Department of Public Works	Homeowner Associations
Road or Highway Department	Chamber of Commerce
Developers	Elected Officials
Land Trusts	Urban Forester
Realtors	Site Plan Reviewer
Real Estate Lenders	Stormwater Management Authority
Civic Associations	Municipal Insurance
Fire Official	Watershed Advocates
Health Department	Residents/and Owners
Land Use Lawyers	