



**IN HARMONY**  
Developers have devised land-efficient housing to reduce sprawl and preserve farmland, like, clockwise from left, Newport Commons; Veranda, which abuts a cornfield; and Millcreek, where Suzanne Wirtz has a home.



Photographs by Tim Shaffer for The New York Times

## NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

# Building Densely In Farm Country

By SANA SIWOLOP

LANCASTER, Pa. **D**ESPITE the arrival of big-box stores, as well as the crush of tourists who come to ogle quilts and shop at factory outlet stores, farmland still envelops two-thirds of Lancaster County.

Agriculture is responsible for one in five jobs in this part of southeastern Pennsylvania, and about a quarter of the county's farmland is in the hands of local Amish families. Farmland preservation, meanwhile, continues to generate support among residents, and county officials estimate that the amount of farmland that has been permanently preserved grew to 67,000 acres in 2006 from 12,000 acres in 1993.

But recently, local officials, concerned that not enough is being done to balance growth and development, have redoubled their efforts, urging developers to come up with more land-efficient housing to reduce sprawl and preserve farmland.

Until recently, housing development in Lancaster focused mostly on single-family homes that sat on relatively abundant lots, the kind of development that has attracted couples like Barry and Dorothy Myers.

The Myerses, who are both 69, spent 18 years living in a large house on two parklike acres in the township of Manheim. But in August they moved to a type of housing development that used to be virtually unheard of in Lancaster. Built in East Hempfield, the development, Veranda, is aimed at offering a mix of housing options, to a variety of residents, in a more compact way. While it still allows for plenty of green space, it also creates pedestrian-friendly small-town street-scapes that are increasingly appearing elsewhere, often under the banner of "neotrad-

itional" design or "New Urbanism."

By big-city standards, housing options at Veranda hardly feel cramped. And so far, the Myerses are happy with their new community. They live in a two-story duplex, a "carriage home" that sits on a new two-acre town green, along with town houses and single-family homes.

"There is already a sense of community here, and the proximity of the houses has helped," Mr. Myers said. "It's not just older people who are buying into it — an awful lot of people in the neighborhood are in their 30s, 40s and 50s, and we've seen everything from toddlers to college-age kids."

Lancaster County officials have been supporting so-called smart-growth initiatives for years. In 1993, the county amended its master plan to try to steer more residential housing, as well as redevelopment, to specially designed "growth areas," and 13 of those areas are now situated within the county's more urban corners.

Last spring, Lancaster amended its master plan once again, responding to concern that too much growth was still occurring outside of its specially designated growth areas. Now the goal is to watch development more carefully within certain rural areas and to encourage the development of denser, as well as more diverse and affordable, housing within the 13 urban growth areas.

County executives say their goals are in line with a nationwide push for more compact housing, as well as Lancaster's changing demographics, which include more retirees and empty nesters. There are also



plenty of first-time home buyers looking for more affordable options than those found in the Philadelphia and New York areas.

In 2003, Lancaster had an estimated 482,775 residents, but county officials expect it will get more than 100,000 new residents by 2030. By then, they think, the county will need more than 53,000 new housing units.

One of the builders who have already heeded the need for more compact mixed-use housing is the Lancaster-based Charter Homes and Neighborhoods. According to Robert Bowman, its president, Charter used to build two to three homes per acre for its single-family developments, but about eight years ago it decided to try to build communities with higher housing density, though as much open space as possible.

Charter Homes is now developing 12 such communities, three of them in Lancaster. One is Veranda, while another is Millcreek in West Lampeter, where three-quarters of the 237 home sites have already been sold

and where 31 acres were preserved as open space.

The third development is Florin Hill, which offers seven types of housing options, from the mid-\$100,000s to \$450,000. Tucked into a hillside of Mount Joy, Florin Hill, which is more townlike, has space for 472 residential units, as well as 120,000 square feet for shops, restaurants and offices.

At Millcreek, two of the newest residents are Suzanne and Ken Wirtz, who moved there in September with their three sons.

Before the move, the couple had been living in a large house on an acre in York County, west of Lancaster. But the family's two older sons were soon to leave home for college, and the couple, who are in their 40s, also wanted to reduce Mr. Wirtz's commute to Baltimore. At first, they looked at smaller homes that sat on larger lots, in places as far away as Maryland, but in the end they bought a slightly larger home on a quarter of an acre at Millcreek, even though the move would more than double Mr. Wirtz's commuting time.

"We looked at developments that were just rows and rows of houses, where the houses were often gorgeous, but they, as well as the land around them, had no personality," Mrs. Wirtz said. Now she walks her dog along Millcreek's walking trails every day, and the relative compactness of the community, as well as the proximity of many kinds of families and retired couples, has helped her family foster a stronger sense of community, she said.

Newport Square, a new mixed-use community based primarily in the township of Warwick, is also attracting a broad variety of people, with its single-family homes, town houses and garden apartments, said Joseph

Asterino, a regional sales manager for Berk Homes in Mohnton, the builder. "It's a complete mix," he said, "everyone from first-time home buyers, to people downsizing and relocating."

Not everyone in Lancaster supports the need for more compact housing. James R. Cowhey, executive director of the Lancaster County Planning Commission, said that while county residents are becoming more receptive to denser development "slowly, but surely," there is some resistance to having the development nearby. Still, he said, "people here have an eye-opening expression when they see the development, as opposed to when they just hear the term."

More concentrated housing faces other challenges in Lancaster. The county planning commission would like to see residential development within its specially designed urban growth areas occur at an average net density of 7.5 dwellings per acre, but some builders say that meeting this number will be challenging because only about 10 of the county's 60 municipalities have already changed zoning laws to allow compact development or are considering changes.

Karen Martynick, executive director of the Lancaster Farmland Trust, said her nonprofit group, which helps to preserve farmland, supports the need for more concentrated housing because Lancaster is continuing to lose about 1,100 acres of farmland a year to development.

"It's not possible to save every acre of farmland here," she said, "but I'd say that 15 of the county's municipalities still don't have the right kind of zoning that they need to help protect those areas that the county has specifically designated for agricultural use."