

From C5

“So we’ve probably tripled or quadrupled the amount of topsoil on these lots, which acts as a sponge,” Turner says.

“So when it rains, that absorbs a lot of water; it’s one of the principles for our drainage system. It holds the water back a little bit longer, which eliminates it getting to that detention pond as fast as it normally gets there.”

One of the drawbacks of the soil treatment has been that all the trees had to be cleared. In essence, East Clayton is being clear-cut for a second time, although this time heavy equipment is making much shorter work of the alders and cottonwoods than the turn-of-the-century loggers with their outsized Douglas firs and cedars.

“When you build to this density, and especially when you’re going to try to save the topsoil, you basically have to take those trees all down,” Turner explains. “You can’t save the trees because you’re putting in another two feet of topsoil. So there’s a lot of conflict between green infrastructure and typical land development.”

“It’s an education process for everybody, including council and including the public.”

‘Sustainability is a compromise’

It has been an education for the developer, too.

Turner has to stop and think when he’s asked whether he’d do it again, knowing what he does now.

“If we set up some rules up front, we might,” he finally says.

He compares himself with the landowners. “I was very naive too,” he says. “You could put me in a category with Norm (Alexander).

“I thought we could really do something neat and different, and we lost control of it. It was being controlled by city staff and because of that, everybody got frustrated, not just us.”

He understands the city planners want to be in control. “That’s their job. They’ve got the degrees and they think they understand the development business a lot better than the naive homeowner. I think that’s what really frustrated Norm. Norm went into it and spent a lot of time and effort and he just got frustrated and said, ‘I give up,’ and left.”

Turner says there were times when he was frustrated enough to walk out himself.

“But we had our money in there. We couldn’t get out of it. We had to move forward and just take what we could get and hope for the best. We were very fortunate that the market had an uptick in it to help us along the way.”

He hopes the city planners are learning from the experience, as well.

“Right now if you asked planning staff, I’m probably the biggest pain in the butt that they’ve been up against for a long time,” he says, grimly.

“But you know, it’s a new product, and there is big risk that we take producing that product. It’s hard for the planners to understand the risk that’s involved. That’s never part of the equation for them.”

Turner says building the first phase of East Clayton has been a painful, drawn-out process, and that it could have been better if city staff had a less adversarial attitude.

“You know, East Clayton could have been so much better,” he says, with regret. “I think we had the right ideas and we had the opportunity to work closer together. And we never quite got there.

“Maybe that’s why I’m a pain in the butt to Surrey, but I thought they were always one-sided. We accomplished a lot, but we had the opportunity to accomplish a lot more. We spent a lot of time arguing about things that we could have mutually agreed upon.”

Turner hopes to do better with future projects, like one in the planning stages in Langley, that also have sustainable-design elements.

And there’s Phase 2 of East Clayton. Surrey council has given the go-ahead, the land has been cleared and work is getting under way. This one’s 23 acres. It will have 85 lots, plus a detached strata site with about 30 units.

BFW will probably do two or three additional phases to build out the land it owns in East Clayton. Meanwhile, “quite a few other developers” have been accumulating land on the east side of 192nd Street and are going through the planning hoops at Surrey city hall. Many of them will be building by next summer.

One thing Turner has learned is, “Sustainability is a compromise. We’ll gradually improve on it, but we can’t do 100 per cent of what we envisioned doing in the first phase, or the second, or the third, or the fourth.

“It’s going to take a lot of years, a lot of effort on everybody’s part to finally get to the point that we thought we could get to right away.”

Trying for touchdowns

Turner says he tried to convince Condon the new community can’t be built all at once on the first try, that it will take “a bunch of little steps.”

“Patrick’s an academic and he looks at things through his rose-coloured glasses,” he says.

“You can’t take that big giant step, as I told Patrick. We used to have many conversations and he’d be kind of disappointed with what we were doing. And I’d say, ‘Patrick, you know, you can’t throw a touchdown every time. Let’s just throw a few little passes, we’ll get there. We’ve got to make sure that we can sell what we produce here.’”

Condon knows about compromise. Even the plans that came out of the second charter were a significant compromise, and they were further whittled down in the final planning and design stages. Still, he says he’s happy with the outcome.

“If I had designed it myself it would have been very different,” he says, “it would have been more utopian. But since it was a group of citizens and stakeholders who came up with it, I thought it was miraculous. And I’m very proud of it.”

He’s concerned about whether Surrey will be able to stay with the game plan — whether, for instance, it will come up with a specific design for the artificial wetlands and make sure they’re part of a future phase, whether it can stay with sustainability principles over the 15- to 20-year process of development in the Clayton area.

Condon’s hope is that sustainability forms the basis for new development standards for



Early resident Sandy Sandford builds a tool shed in his back yard. ‘A lot of the people moving in . . . want that little community, you watch my house and I’ll watch yours.’



Ryan (left) and Shawn Stajcer of Mark IV Developments, which is building 26 houses in East Clayton. Both developer brothers have bought homes in the community.

Surrey and, ultimately, for the whole Greater Vancouver region.

“We’re on the cusp, we’re kind of on a tipping point with this stuff,” he says, noting that there are other projects under way or planned in the region based on similar principles.

Several housing projects at Simon Fraser University and in Chilliwack will include infiltration infrastructure; the False Creek Olympic Village is supposed to become part of a housing development based on sustainable development principles.

The local projects are part of an international movement, all of them designed to put the post-war suburb behind us. Others are under way in Calgary, Cornwall, Ont. and the Laguna Hills in the Sacramento, Calif., area. Besides East Clayton, the only project that’s working with infiltration strategies and moving away from storm-sewer systems is at Coffee Creek, Ind.

“And yet it remains to be seen if we will successfully prevail in convincing all the powers-that-be in the region to adopt this as a new standard,” says Condon, adding that if some jurisdictions adopt sustainability standards and others don’t, the developers will likely go where it’s easiest and cheapest to build.

That means the GVRD and perhaps the provincial government will have to step in to set regional standards.

When they do, Condon hopes they take a look at the development cost charges municipalities levy to pay for municipal infrastructure, which in Surrey amount to \$18,000 for a single-family lot.

Right now, those charges are a disincentive to sustainability, he argues, since they’re such a large percentage of the cost of building a small house on a small lot that they kill all incentive to build them, and developers much prefer to build big homes on big lots.

If builders got breaks on development charges for things like building smaller homes on smaller lots with access to transit, the charges would work “to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked,” Condon reasons. “Right now they’re rewarding the wicked and punishing the virtuous.”

Paying for Mother Earth

At Surrey planning, Dinwoodie agrees East Clayton has been compromised. But, he adds, the East Clayton Neighbourhood Con-

cept Plan’s targets “are probably 80 per cent of what we had originally set out to do.”

The first few phases might include 50 to 60 per cent of what the concept plan aimed for, he adds. “But it’s still a quantum ahead of what might have happened more conventionally over time.”

Although his department was constantly at loggerheads with the developer, Dinwoodie offers an analysis nearly identical to Turner’s: “You don’t move from one state of being to another state of being in one step. You move in a series of steps, getting comfortable with each step as you go along and then growing with it.”

He praises Turner’s BFW Developments for “stretching themselves” to build East Clayton. The city has done the same, he says. So have the utility companies that agreed to modify their normal approaches to accommodate sustainability-based changes.

The city, Dinwoodie says, is buying into Condon’s vision. It recognizes there’s a price to pay, but “if it means that you can enjoy the natural creek nearby, the fish life in it, and feel like we’re maintaining Mother Earth, you might pay extra for that.”

“We want to preserve it for future generations and if we’re going to do that, we can’t do things the way we have been doing them.”

Future phases will push forward, he says. Applications now being processed call for up to 70 per cent lane lots, for example. He expects other municipalities to buy into the same notions, over time.

“You have to look at East Clayton as kind of the thin edge of the wedge, I think. It opens the door.”

McCallum says he’s a strong believer in sustainability. As long as it works, he says, “we should do it for all our developments. In fact, we should expand it a little more. I can see it being in all our communities down the road.”

Experiencing the porches

Ryan Stajcer is a believer. He runs a small home-building company, Mark IV Developments, with his brother Shawn, supervised by their father, Ron.

Mark IV’s 26 homes in the project comprise the lion’s share of their annual output of 30 to 40 homes. It’s their first sustainable project, but Stajcer says they took it in their stride.

All the builders in Phase One got together at

the start of the project and agreed to work with each other, and that made a difference.

“It was kind of trial by error thing,” Stajcer says. “We were willing to try a lot of the things if they benefited the environment. So we went into it kind of slow and it was a little bit scary in the beginning, but it was like anything. If you don’t know how to do it, it’s hard. Once you figure it out, it’s easy. And it’s benefiting everything, and the drainage system is great.”

In normal subdivisions on sloping land, adjoining back yards would have to use a swale to channel rainwater down, say, a series of five lots to a drain at the bottom lot. That works fine until one builder or homeowner blocks the swale in any one of the lots. “It backs up all the way up the line. It doesn’t necessarily flood anything, but those swales become wet, mosquito-infested, and it’s just a muddy mess.”

The infiltration pits in Phase One fix that problem by giving each home “their own little mini-catch-basin” dug into the lawn. “It actually holds water, so it seems to be working a lot better.”

Like Townline, Mark IV has sold all its Phase One homes — prices started at \$284,900 — and Stajcer doesn’t see a problem with the pricing. Buyers of small-lot homes “are getting a beautiful home for almost townhouse prices, and that’s what’s selling.”

Buyers warmed up immediately to rear-lane access and the uncluttered streets that result, he adds. Mark IV will happily participate in future phases of East Clayton.

On a stroll through Phase One, Stajcer points out an area reserved for an elementary school, as well as a stretch of treed land between Phase One and the Fraser Highway that’s slated to become a retail zone for the subdivision, probably anchored by a supermarket.

He also points out his own house, and his brother Shawn’s. Builder Jeff Bontkes of Benchmark Homes also lives in the neighbourhood.

It’s something hands-on builders are doing more frequently. They get a deal on one of the first homes in a subdivision they’re building, they move in, they don’t have to commute to work, and just by being there, they’re giving other home buyers “a little bit of reassurance because I’m just a door-knock away.”

When the project is done, “we sell, and usually move to a different subdivision.”

So the Stajcers get a feel for what it’s like living in one of their projects, and that helps when it’s time to plan the next one. One thing they’re experiencing in East Clayton is the porches, even on blocks that have front driveways.

“We all have the decks in the front,” Ryan says. “It’s a nice place to sit down, have someone over, have a drink. And then you start talking to your neighbours.”

In homes that don’t have rear laneways, you also meet over-the-fence neighbours who live on the next block over.

Listening to the crickets

Across Ryan Stajcer’s back fence, John (Sandy) Sandford is building a tool shack in his modest back yard.

Sandford, an Air Canada employee with unscheduled time off while the airline goes through another round of financial troubles, is in his 50s and raising a second family.

He’s a putterer, and he was planning to renovate the house on the east side of Cloverdale that he owned for 15 years.

He got as far as an exploratory visit to Home Depot. On the way home he saw the signs for East Clayton. “I swung in here and saw all these showhomes and I thought, uh-oh.”

He liked what he saw and he bought. In East Clayton, he has a smaller lot — he has to be careful not to whack his head on a meter casing on the side of the house when he walks from the back to the front yard — but the inside of the house is bigger and he likes current building technology better.

Like Mark Peters, he has been taken by the friendly atmosphere in the new subdivision. And yes, he’s spending a lot of time on the front porch.

“Not everybody uses them, but like Patty across the street there” — he points to a woman who waves back at him — “uses hers all the time. We sort of yell across the street once in a while. It is a very friendly atmosphere.”

“It seems that a lot of the people moving in want to know their neighbours. They want that little community, you watch my house and I’ll watch yours, keep an eye on my kids.”

Sandford is looking forward to shops being built next to Phase One. “That’s going to be fantastic, to get away from hopping into your vehicle every two minutes and running off somewhere. The traffic in places like Richmond is just nuts. Langley’s like that too, in the main core.

“This place, being away from those areas, gives me the ability to take the back roads into the place, and that’s very nice too. It gets me away from the hustle and bustle.”

For now at least, the evenings remind him of country living. He and his wife sit on the porch in the evenings, the alder and cottonwood forest half a block away, listening to the crickets.

Sandford knows the crickets will be gone when the forest is cleared for another phase. But he’ll be staying. □

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Further reading

A brief history of Surrey

<http://www.members.shaw.ca/j.a.brown/Surrey.html>

An art historian’s look at Levittown

<http://tigger.uic.edu/~pbbales/Levittown.html>

A paper on health problems related to urban sprawl

<http://www.publichealthgrandrounds.unc.edu/urban/frumkin.pdf>

The James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Liveable Environments

<http://www.sustainable-communities.agsci.ubc.ca/>

The Headwaters Project (East Clayton plan)

<http://www.sustainable-communities.agsci.ubc.ca/projects/Headwaters.html>

The developer’s site

<http://www.claytonvillage.ca/>

Sustainable Communities Network

<http://www.sustainable.org>