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## New Standard of Living Blossoms at 'EcoVillage'

Loudoun Subdivision's Residents Bond Through Social, Environmental Pact

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Not far from the newly sprouted subdivisions of Loudoun County, a gravel path winds through tall grasses toward a cluster of homes where life is lived differently than in most places. Follow the path to the end and find the home of Grady O'Rear and his wife, Tena Meadows O'Rear. Go around their organic garden and step inside and onto their floor, made of recycled fence post. Then check out the natural linoleum floor in their bathroom (so natural, it's an "almost edible product," Grady O'Rear says), and don't miss the toilet ("low flush, but one flush," he adds proudly). And after that, go meet their neighbors. The O'Rears know them all.



Most of its master plan calls for EcoVillage, a community in Loudoun County's Lovettsville area, to remain mostly forested.

(Sarah L. Voisin -- The Washington Post)

At EcoVillage, which the O'Rears helped found, the idea is to live in harmony with Earth, and with one another. Residents have forged an uncommonly tight-knit neighborhood, with covenants designed to foster a sense of community, and promoted an equally remarkable devotion to protecting the environment, with homes and land-use rules that take nature into consideration.

"It's important for us to grow our sense of larger self," said Grady O'Rear, 53. "How can we be more aware and mindful of one another as human beings, and how can we be more aware and mindful of the environment?" EcoVillage is a good place to start, residents say. Three years after the first family moved in, residents profess an adoration for their community, one that they say rejects the smothering isolation that is all too common in modern suburbia while also embracing an environmentally sensitive way of living.

Located near Lovettsville in northern Loudoun, EcoVillage is among the first of several nearby "co-housing" communities -- small-scale neighborhoods that operate on the basis of active resident participation and typically make decisions by consensus. In the District, Maryland and Northern Virginia, at least four such communities now operate, and at least three more are planned, according to Mid-Atlantic Cohousing. The idea behind them is a neighborliness and togetherness not known in the cardboard cutouts of the rest of suburbia.

But EcoVillage has gotten off to a relatively slow start. The O'Rears acknowledge that the community remains small, with only eight households. Thirteen more lots have been sold or are under contract, and the couple visualizes a total of 50 homes before the community is complete. "We are still in the very early stages of this development. It's probably premature to draw humongous conclusions," said Tena Meadows

O'Rear, 55. "But in terms of village life, it's a rich social experience. In terms of the environmental goals, we're definitely making progress. I would not say we've arrived at some Utopian point. I personally feel a sense, and I think the community feels a sense, of pride in the efforts we've made."

### **Don't Call Them Hippies**

To many, the marriage of community and ecological principles brings to mind the 1960s -- an association that makes the residents of EcoVillage cringe. They say it's important to note they are not hippy freaks; they do have private lives.

Among others, they are a part-time teacher, a retired psychologist, a software developer, a Japanese tutor, a health care consultant. What they have all coalesced around is the idea that the environment should be treasured. "Part of the way for me to be fulfilled in life is to develop networks around me that support things I believe in," said Phill Thomas, a computer consultant who moved to EcoVillage with his wife, Lily, and their son, Henry.

He has developed those networks with ease at EcoVillage, where residents have agreed to live by certain rules for what they consider the greater good. If residents want to plant something in their garden, for instance, the plant cannot be of any variety. It must be of a type native to the land, and it must be grown organically. No pesticides, no herbicides.

From the soil, regulations at EcoVillage reach to the sky. Concerned that outdoor lights would refract into the atmosphere and obscure the view of the Milky Way, residents have agreed to position or cover all of their lights in such a way as to not cause light pollution.

Virginia Ratliff, who retired to EcoVillage, said she and her husband, Bill, were prepared to "walk the walk instead of just talking the talk" when it came to protecting the environment. Like everyone in the village, they each have to spend four hours a month doing community service. Failure to do so means a fee of \$12.50 for each hour not worked. The money is used to pay for whatever services are needed. Ratliff, who not long ago lived a block and a half from a 7-Eleven, now spends some of her time in the dirt, removing "invasive" plants that could wreak havoc on other flora and fauna. She acknowledged that she has to put in extra time for the benefit of the community and the Earth, but it's not as if she's doing it against her will. "I have the freedom to make decisions about most things beyond my commitments," she said. "This is my home."

### **A View to the Future**

Michael Scalia, 46, a software developer, works out of his home several days a week. He was on his second-story porch one recent day, his laptop set up on a table and the chair pulled up close. What he didn't have -- a bookshelf, a nameplate -- he made up for with a magnificent view: Furnace Mountain, part of the Catoctin chain, towered in the distance. Scalia said he and his wife, Barbara Mikula, sleep on their porch sometimes,

in a cot off to the side. They wake to the rising sun. It's not such a bad setup. As land in the county is developed at lightning speed, Scalia said, EcoVillage stands out as a rarity: The development "makes a place like this more precious."

The sunlit house itself, like others at EcoVillage, comes with reminders of environmentally sensitive lifestyles. The siding is made of recycled sawdust and cement. The windows use passive solar technology that keeps the heat in during the winter and out during the summer. All appliances are energy efficient.

Living in harmony with Earth doesn't come cheap. The cost of environmentally friendly materials drives up the price of homes at EcoVillage. One couple, who are moving to Maryland so they can retain control of a family home, recently put their three-bedroom house on the market for \$415,000. The house is on nearly half an acre. Still, EcoVillage residents say it's worth it. In addition to nice homes and a beautiful landscape, they say they have the benefit of the larger property, all 180 acres of it. At EcoVillage, most of the land is untouched; about 70 percent to 75 percent of it is to remain forested forever.

The master site plan, shown on a large board kept in the O'Rears' home, indicates a few salmon-colored pedestrian routes and a main road for cars, but most of the board is green. About 11,000 trees -- pines, oaks, hazelnut, sweet gum -- have been planted to help with reforestation. Strategies are in place to help slow soil erosion and purify the water. It is all "part of a holistic approach to our existence on the planet," Grady O'Rear said.

### **A Sociable Society**

Despite the focus on the environment, EcoVillage residents don't spend all day, every day talking about nature. They lead disparate lives and have their own needs to attend to. Part of what they share is a longing to be connected to the area where they live.

Scalia, for one, was tired of neighborhoods where people woke up, zipped off to work, zipped back and never interacted. The drone of suburbia got to him. "There's no connection to what's going on outside their home," Scalia said. "It just doesn't seem like a healthy life."

The other day, Scalia and his wife joined others in Phill and Lily Thomas's home for a potluck dinner of organic pasta and grilled vegetables. Neighbors walked through the unlocked front door and greeted the others with hugs. "You've got people here you can trust," Phill Thomas said.

Almost all of EcoVillage's residents had shown up. Grady O'Rear was in the basement, seated in a pint-size chair next to the Thomases' 4-year-old, Henry, who was playing on the computer. Upstairs, Mikula and other neighbors were talking about cicadas. And all around, people seemed to be having a good time.

The potluck dinner is a weekly affair. It shifts to a different home every time, but that arrangement is temporary. Plans at EcoVillage call for a 5,000-square-foot common house where dinner will be available every night during the workweek. There will also be an area for child care, guest rooms, a commercial kitchen and

community mailboxes.

What the plans don't call for is an outsider to oversee things. Ever. There is no hired firm, or even a part-time office worker, to make sure EcoVillage runs smoothly. The residents do almost all of the work themselves, taking charge of facility maintenance, land stewardship and the EcoVillage budget. (Each household pays an annual assessment of \$1,200.) Residents must belong to at least one of eight governing committees.

The result of the social and financial covenants is a lot of togetherness. Neighbors know one another well. But that's the idea, said Tena Meadows O'Rear. "It's not that we don't have private lives," she said. "The time we spend together has a whole different quality to it. We're trying to intentionally develop relationships that feel good to everyone."