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Where We Live: Loudoun's environmentally conscious EcoVillage

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The community of EcoVillage in Virginia has gravel roads, instead of pavement, to minimize harmful runoff into the Potomac River watershed. It also slows vehicular traffic. (M.J. McAteer FTWP/PHOTO BY M.J. MCATEER FTWP)

EcoVillage is a community in Virginia, but it also is in its own state of mind. Its residents may be a typical middle-class mix of mostly white-collar workers, but they are united by a common, yet uncommon, ideal: to live harmoniously with nature and with one another.

That "green" goal is apparent from the moment a visitor turns into EcoVillage from Taylorstown Road, a by-way in northern Loudoun County. Unlike the entry into the development next door, this road is unpaved. The putting-green-perfect lawns of so many planned communities are nowhere in evidence, either. Instead, the terrain looks, well, a bit scruffy. But the gravel and the unmanicured landscape are 100 percent intentional. Dave Wiseman, a Web consultant and the general manager of EcoVillage, says that the development

attracts a self-selecting group of people who, to varying degrees, are in search of a more sustainable and locally centered lifestyle. Gravel, instead of pavement, minimizes harmful runoff into the Potomac River watershed. It also slows vehicular traffic, which in EcoVillage is viewed as a necessary evil. In pursuit of the goal of more pedestrianism, most villagers choose to park in lots scattered around the site's periphery rather than in front of their homes.

Although it's become almost mainstream to be "green," residents of EcoVillage, founded in 1996, are on the cutting edge of the movement. Prospective residents must conform to strict ecological guidelines that specify standards for everything from architectural design and construction materials to outdoor lighting and landscaping. Villagers can pick from six available floor plans or work with approved architects on their own plans. Currently, 14 houses are grouped in clusters on one-third-to-three-quarter-acre lots to minimize their footprint on the land. Another 14 lots, nine of which are for sale at \$80,000 and up, await houses.

The au naturel scenery also reflects the village mind-set. Residents are gradually replacing invasive and imported plant species with indigenous ones, and in an effort at reforestation, they have planted more than 11,000 trees. Such land-management efforts have helped make the site a haven for birds and led the National Audubon Society to certify EcoVillage as a Home Wildlife Sanctuary. Eighty-five percent of its 90 acres are protected open space.

Hana and Gabor Funk — he does construction, she's a stay-at-home mother of two — moved to EcoVillage about a year and a half ago, and they live in what is perhaps the village's most ambitiously green domicile, a straw bale house. The straw bales, along with timber beams, are encased in thick, stucco walls that are both strong and insulating. The Funks have a solar system on the roof to heat their water, as well as the house itself, via pipes that run under their floors. The heat is regulated with a daunting array of on-off options on pipes in the basement. After much trial and error, the couple learned that "supercharging" the floors every day from noon to 2 provides heat all day. If the sun doesn't shine enough, an electric backup system kicks in to keep their house warm, but the Funks' last electric bill was just \$35. Hana Funk expects that, given the gray skies typical of the region in winter, the family's winter electric bills will be somewhat higher.

Other innovative features of the Funk home include a "living roof" of sedum. The low-lying plant with its bright, tiny flowers thrives in a shallow growing medium spread across the roof and provides insulation from the brutal summer sun. The Funks have composting toilets, which Hana says are vented and, thus, odorless. Their "gray water," the term for the runoff from shower, washing machine and dishwasher, empties into irrigation channels in the garden. "Getting to know the house has been a trip," says Hana, with a laugh.

Grady O'Rear and his wife, Tena, have lived in the village since 2001, and he is one of its founders. He says one of the best ways to conserve energy is to pick the right orientation for a house. His own house has just a few, small windows on the north (cold) and west (hot) ends, but many windows on the south side, which provides passive solar heat and floods of light. The front porch, deck and second-floor open-air sleeping porch are all at the east end of the house, which is sheltered from the prevailing winds. The front vestibule, with its storage area for coats and boots, doubles as an airlock.

O'Rear, who is an environmental consultant, has installed a solar water-heating system, photovoltaic panels to generate electricity and geothermal underground piping to minimize the heating and cooling of water, but he says that the placement of a house and the tightness of its construction remain the most crucial factors in reducing energy consumption. "It's a living building challenge," he says, "to make a house function like an organism." Like other residents of EcoVillage, O'Rear can't say whether all his conservation efforts ultimately have been cost-effective, because his choices, like those made by other villagers, have not really been about the money.

Tom Regan and his wife, Barbara, for example, initially moved to EcoVillage to escape the traffic and congestion of Vienna. Now, Regan says, he can walk outside and hear only birds. Four years in the village have turned him into more of an environmentalist, though, he says, explaining, "You learn to think more about how overall you live your life." Regan particularly has come to value the community's emphasis on cooperation and collaboration. He doesn't mind the few hours a month of community service that is required from both adults and children, and he enjoys communal get-togethers such as pot luck suppers and tree-planting parties.

If his four children have a problem when he isn't home, Regan says that he knows and they know that they always can find help next door. "That kind of stuff," he says, "you just can't pay for."