

# RURAL SITING GUIDELINES

TOWN OF HILLSDALE

COLUMBIA COUNTY, NEW YORK

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*This document was prepared with financial  
assistance from the J. M. Kaplan Fund.*

#### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the Hillsdale Master Plan Committee (August Sena, Chairman) for their hard work, as well as Roderick Lovely of White Mountain Survey, whose mastery of computer graphics made this document possible.

We dedicate these Guidelines to the memory of Jennifer Shakespeare, who helped us get started and whom we miss very much.

## INTRODUCTION TO HILLSDALE RURAL SITING GUIDELINES

The purpose of these guidelines is to illustrate how to apply sections of the zoning text to specific sites in the RU District. The first section of the guidelines contains general siting principles designed to help landowners and reviewing boards plan projects that fit into Hillsdale's rural countryside. The illustrations that follow apply the zoning text to hypothetical parcels to show the range of choices and flexibility provided to landowners in using and developing their land. The proposed zoning encourages types of development that have traditionally been recognized as defining "rural character" (but which are illegal under most modern zoning codes), while discouraging suburban development patterns.

These guidelines show how the development patterns permitted in the zoning lay out on the land, providing a guide for interpreting the zoning law. The illustrations show four typical land parcels, containing 17, 60, 200, and 8 acres, respectively. For each parcel, various options for development are shown, along with examples of development that would not be permitted. These examples are intended as **illustrations only**. The unique topography, vegetation and other natural and man-made features of each parcel should guide the planning process for that site. The relationship of each parcel to its surroundings should also be considered. Also, most of these illustrations show **maximum development** of a particular site. It is unlikely that the market in Hillsdale would sustain maximum build-out for most parcels in the foreseeable future.

The two basic types of development illustrated include conventional subdivisions with 3-acre minimum lot sizes and flexible lot subdivisions at a 3-acre maximum density, where individual lots may be of any size and 80% of the land is preserved as open space. The flexible approach is preferred, because it protects open space more effectively and gives landowners more options. The Planning Board has the authority to require a flexible plan where necessary to protect land of conservation value, unless the development will have no more than one-third of the otherwise allowable units. Because a great variety of options are available for flexible development, only a few of the many possible approaches can be shown.

The goal of the zoning law and these guidelines is to maintain the traditional settlement pattern of the rural countryside while allowing compatible growth. Where development occurs in concentrations significantly greater than currently exist in the countryside, that development should follow the traditional patterns of a rural hamlet. These patterns are described in the guidelines for hamlet development.

Landowners are encouraged to consider the Hamlet Building and Site Planning Guidelines for new buildings that are visible from existing or new town roads and for major clusters of development. These building and site planning guidelines are mandatory only for commercial and multi-family development. However, Hillsdale will retain its rural and historic character as it grows only if builders respect the Town's historic land use patterns and building traditions.

## GENERAL RURAL SITING PRINCIPLES

In the Rural District (RU), the following guidelines are recommended for planning subdivisions and siting residences, businesses, and accessory structures.

1. Wherever feasible retain and reuse existing old farm roads and country lanes rather than constructing new roads or driveways. This minimizes clearing and disruption of the landscape and takes advantage of the attractive way that old lanes are often lined with trees and stone walls. (This is not appropriate where reuse of a road would require widening in a manner that destroys trees or stone walls.)
2. Preserve stone walls and hedgerows. These traditional landscape features define outdoor areas in a natural way and create corridors useful for wildlife. Using these features as property lines is often appropriate, as long as setback requirements do not result in constructing buildings in the middle of fields.
3. Avoid placing buildings in the middle of open fields. Place them either at the edges of fields or in cleared areas next to the fields. Septic systems and leach fields may be located in fields, however.
4. Unless buildings are designed traditionally and located close to the road in the manner historically found in the town, use existing vegetation and topography to buffer and screen them.
5. Minimize clearing of vegetation at the edge of the road, clearing only as much as is necessary to create a driveway entrance with adequate sight distance. Use curves in the driveway to reduce the visibility of buildings.
6. Site buildings so that they do not protrude above treetops and crestlines of hills as seen from public places and roads. Use vegetation as a backdrop to reduce the prominence of the structure. Wherever possible, open up views by selective cutting of small trees and lower branches of large trees, rather than by clearing large areas or removing mature trees.
7. Minimize crossing of steep slopes with roads and driveways. When building on slopes, take advantage of the topography by building multi-level structures with entrances on more than one level (e.g. walk-out basements, garages under buildings), rather than grading the entire site flat. Use the flattest portions of the site for subsurface sewage disposal systems and parking areas. Use best management practices for erosion and sedimentation control, as recommended by the Columbia County Soil and Water Conservation District or other natural resource agencies.

## ILLUSTRATED RURAL SITING GUIDELINES

The symbols below are used in the illustrations that follow.  
(Section numbers in the explanatory text refer to Sections of the Zoning Law.)

### LEGEND



LAND OF CONSERVATION VALUE



LAND PROTECTED BY  
CONSERVATION EASEMENT



STREAM CORRIDOR



WETLAND



PARKS/GREENS



BUILDINGS



CONTOUR LINES



STONE WALL



TREE LINE



TRAIL



SHARED DRIVEWAY

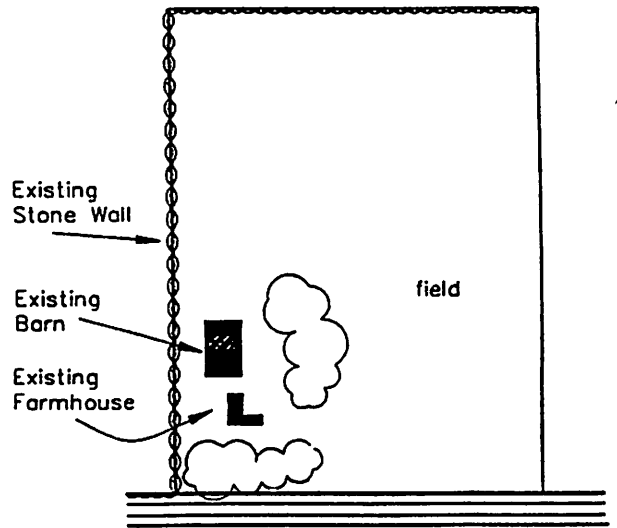


PLANTED BUFFER

## 17-ACRE PARCEL

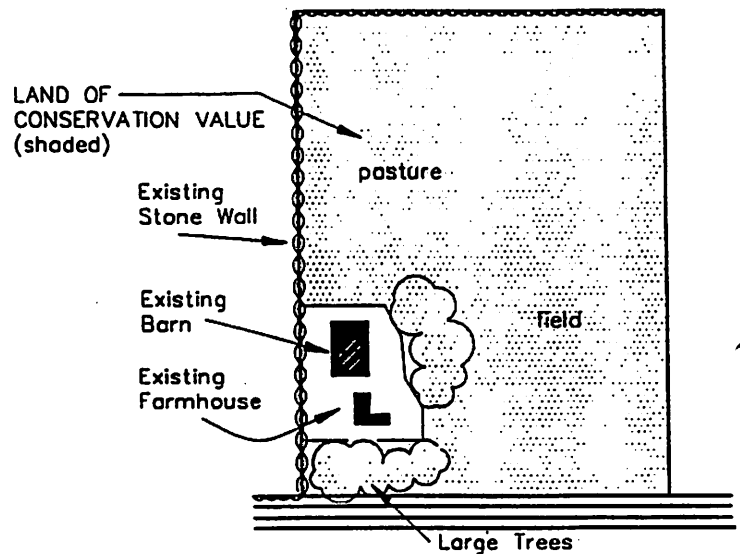
### Existing Parcel

This 17-acre parcel consists of agricultural land with a farm house and barn nestled behind large trees in the south-west corner.



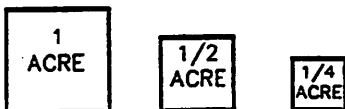
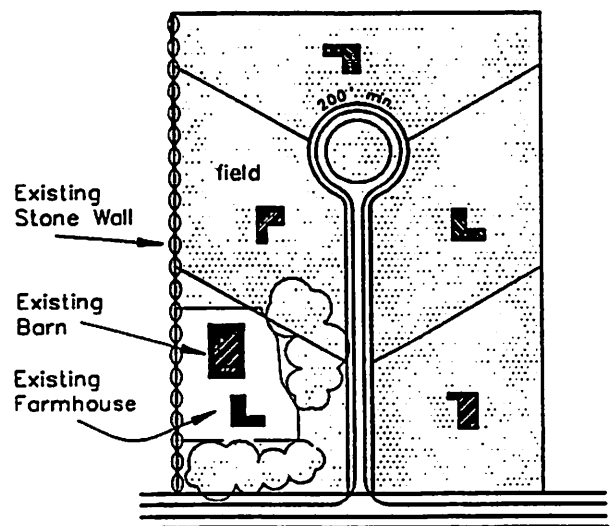
### Conservation Analysis

Applying the criteria in Section 4.5-1, Conservation Value of Open Space, the field, pasture, and large trees are land of "conservation value" that is worthy of preservation, especially the areas that are most visible from the road. This area is shaded on the map.

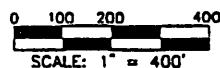


### Conventional 3-Acre Subdivision Plan

This conventional subdivision consists of five 3-acre lots with a minimum of 200 feet of road frontage. The plan shown should not be approved, however, since it would develop most of the open space of conservation value. The Planning Board should require the developer to do a Flexible Lot Subdivision with a maximum of five lots and at least 80% of the land preserved as open space.



Lot Size Reference



## 17-ACRE PARCEL

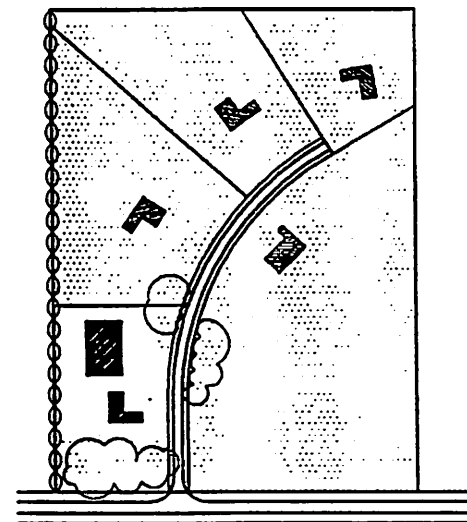
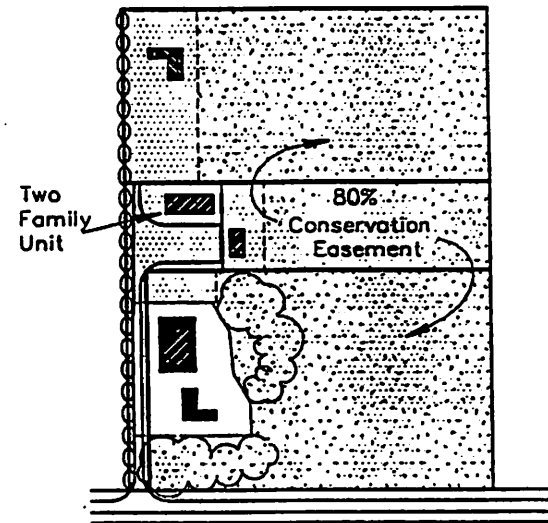
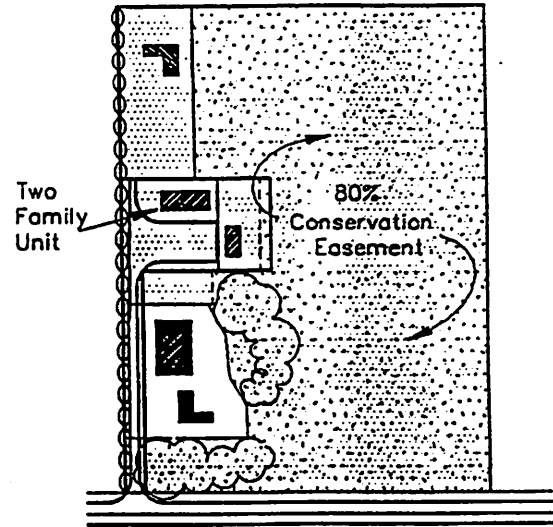
### Flexible Lot Subdivision Options

The five units allowed may be in lots of any size as long as 80% of the land is preserved as open space and the lots comply with the dimensional standards in Section 4.3 and health department regulations for water supply and sewage disposal. In the two illustrations, 80% of the parcel is preserved as open space by conservation easement, with two different lot configurations shown. In the first example, all of the preserved open space remains with the farmhouse and barn, with two small lots containing single family homes and one lot that has a two-family residence. These houses are sited to minimize their impact on the view from the road.

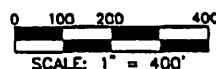
The second layout shows the same houses in the same places, but the open space is split among three different lots. This approach is appropriate where the land is wooded or where fields are divided by hedgerows or natural boundary lines. Breaking up a large open field with lot lines is usually not recommended unless the conservation easement contains land management guidelines for the field. The variety of lot sizes shown provides market flexibility and the clustering of houses offers the opportunity to create a neighborhood feeling. Other layouts that preserve open space of conservation value would also be acceptable.

### Unacceptable Flexible Lot Subdivision

This Flexible Lot Subdivision does not preserve the open space of conservation value. The siting of the houses destroys the field as an agricultural and scenic resource.



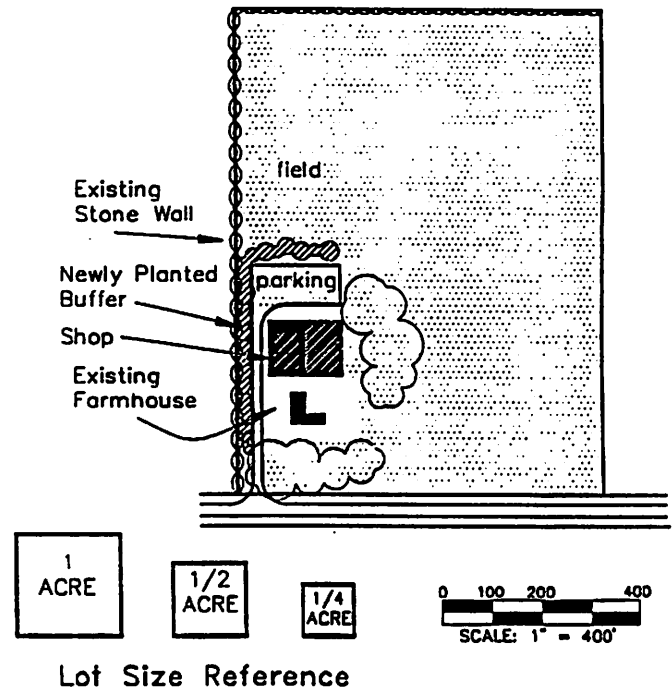
Lot Size Reference



## 17-ACRE PARCEL

### Mixed Uses

Another appropriate use of a 17-acre property might be as a site for a small business, which is allowed by special permit. In this example the barn has been expanded and converted into a small machine shop employing six people. It is screened from the road by the farmhouse and trees. The neighboring property is protected by a planted buffer and by conditions in the special permit limiting the hours of operation and requiring sound-proofing. The farmhouse can still be a residence and the farmland can be used by the owner or leased to another farmer. Additional house lots can be added later as shown in the previous examples. As an alternative, the barn could be converted to rental apartments, also by special permit. These small-scale commercial uses of under-utilized agricultural buildings that have no close neighbors can generate enough extra income to enable a farmer to keep his land open and productive.

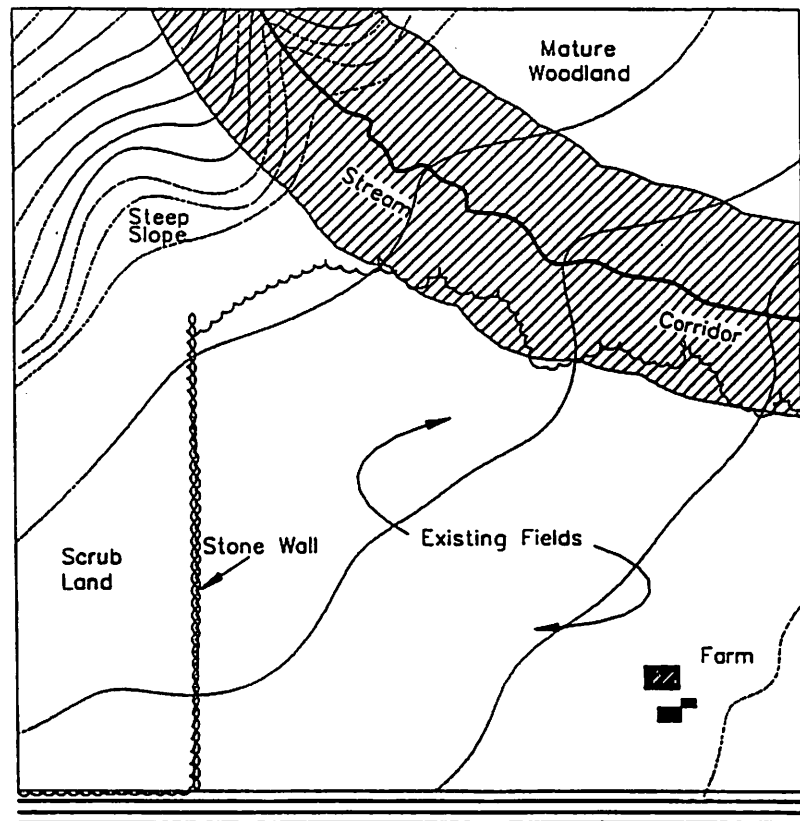




## 60-ACRE PARCEL

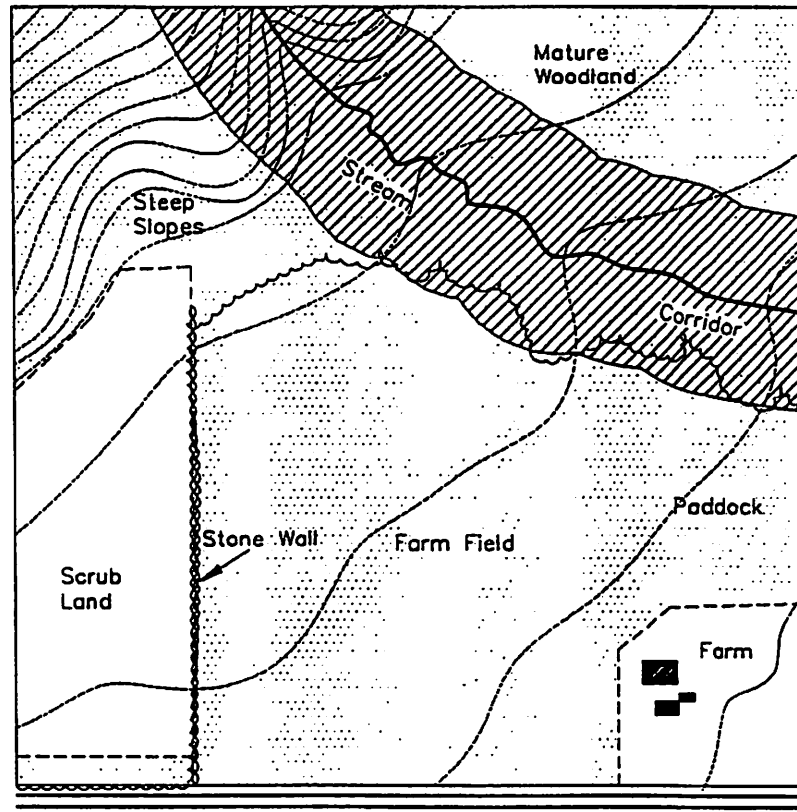
### Existing Parcel

This tract includes recently logged young woodlands (scrub land), agricultural fields, forested steep slopes and a stream corridor, as well as an existing farmstead.

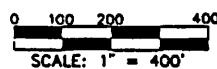


### Conservation Analysis

Land of conservation value includes the steep slope area, the stream corridor and mature woodlands beyond the stream, and the agricultural land. In addition, the land along the road has scenic value. These areas are shaded on the map. The scrub land and the disturbed land around the farmstead do not have significant conservation value.



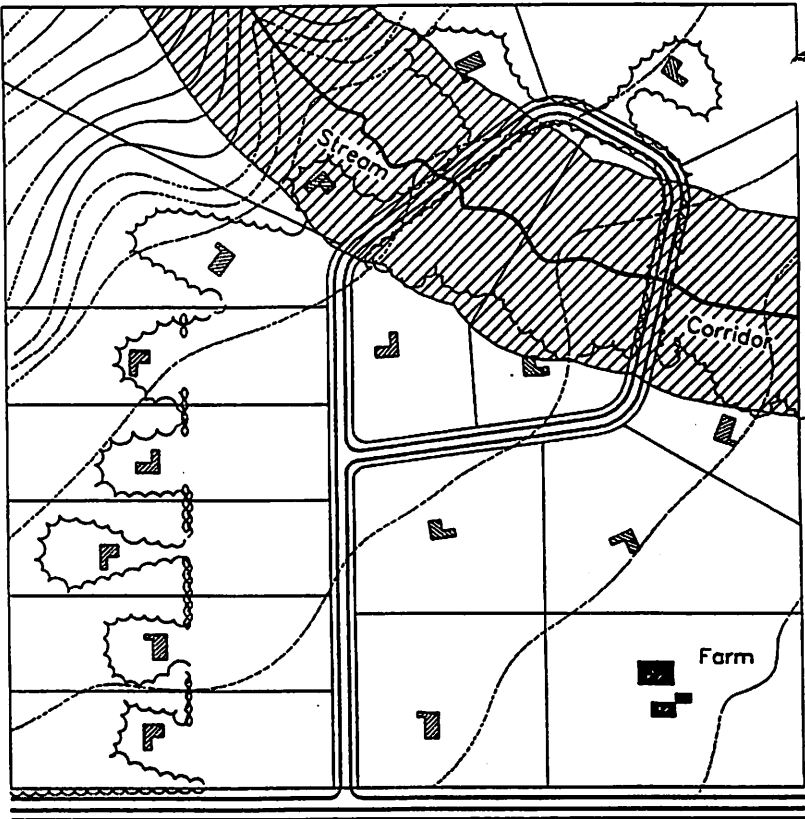
Lot Size Reference



60-ACRE PARCEL

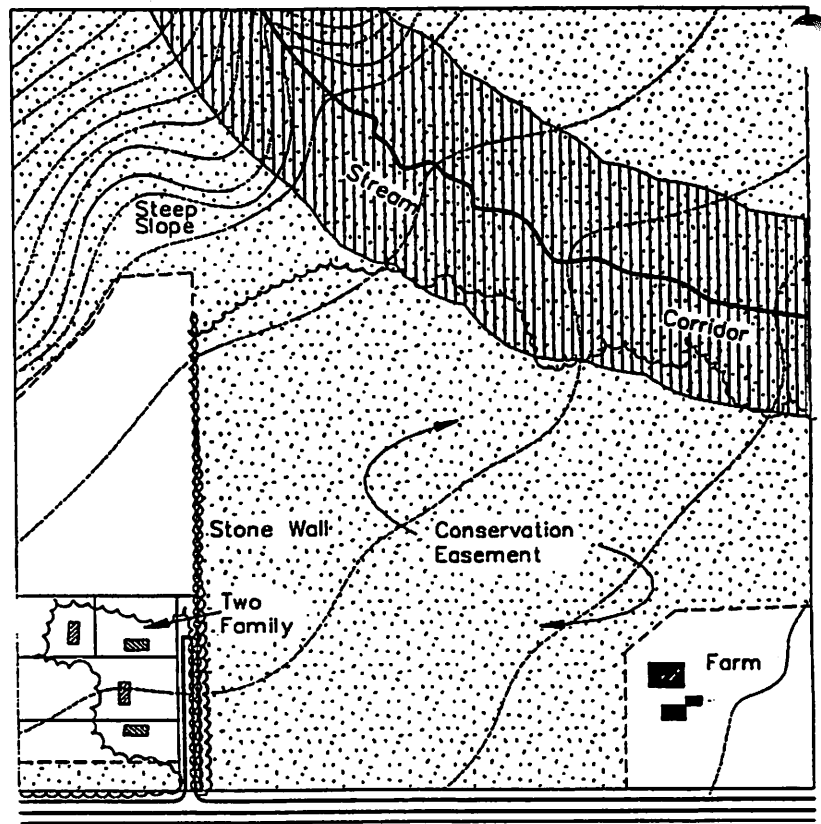
Conventional 3-Acre Subdivision Plan

This conventional subdivision consists of 16 lots of at least 3 acres. The plan shown cannot be approved, however, since it would develop most of the open space of conservation value. In a Flexible Lot Subdivision, up to 16 lots would be permitted as long as at least 80% of the land is preserved as open space.

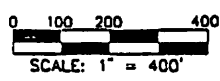


Flexible Lot Subdivision, 6 Units

The cluster of houses in this example is similar to rural farm complexes. The conservation easement creates a scenic amenity for all the homeowners, while the farmland continues to be owned and worked by the farmer. Careful siting takes advantage of the existing stone wall and tree row and allows for further development of the property later. Since the number of lots here is less than one half of the probable number that would result from a conventional subdivision plan, no conventional plan is required to prove the lot count. 80% of the site is protected by conservation easements. The conservation easement area does not include land that is within the private yards of the houses. Protected land includes the stream corridor, a hillside visible from the road, and a farm field which continues to be owned and worked by the farmer.



Lot Size Reference



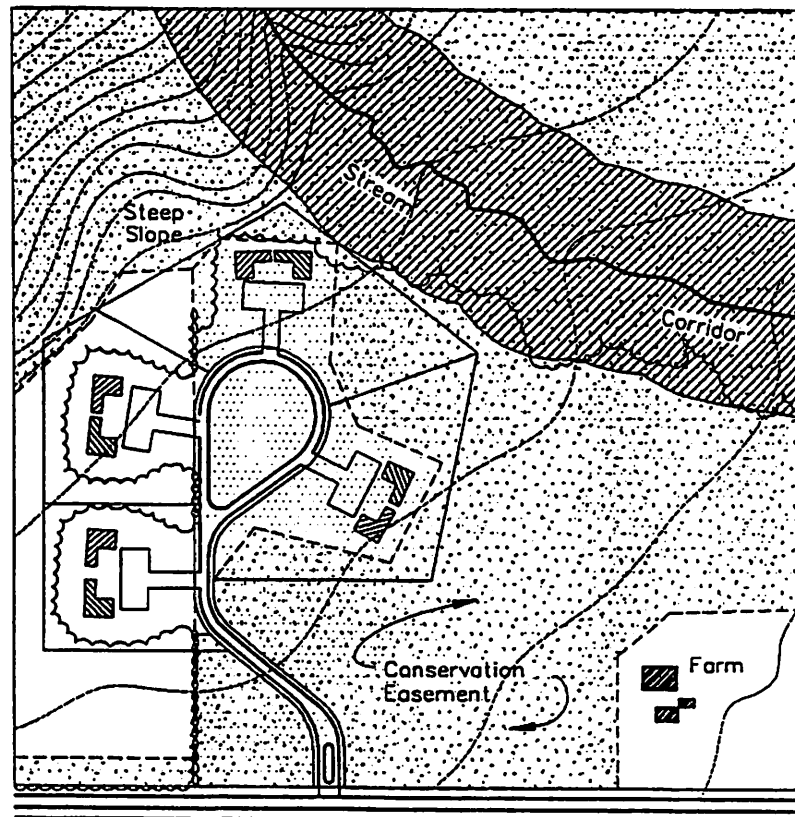
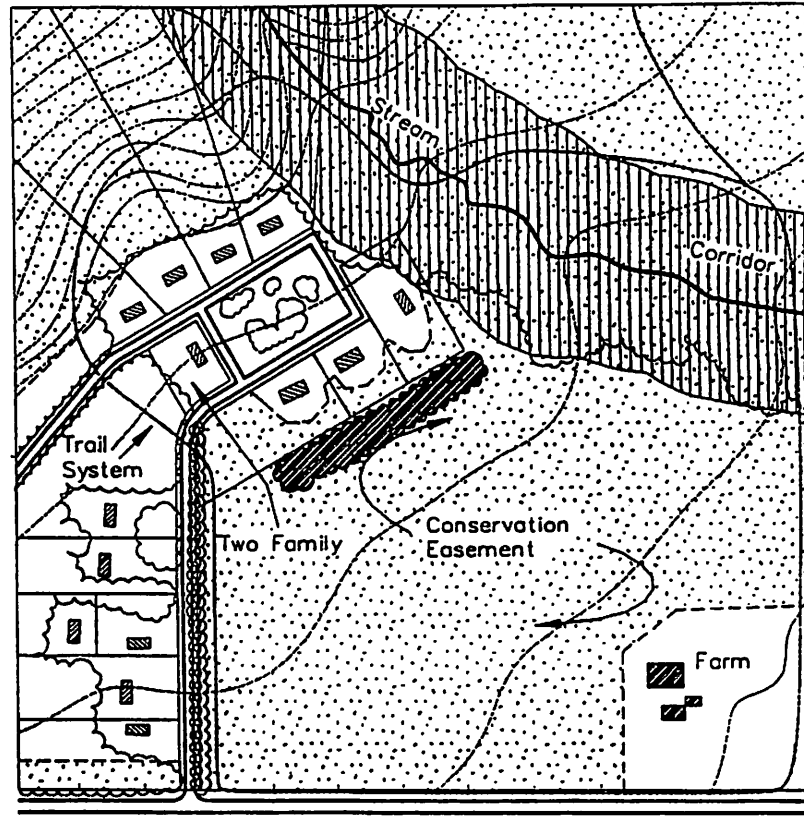
## 60-ACRE PARCEL

### Flexible Lot Subdivision, 16 Units

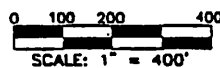
This example shows an expansion of the previous plan up to the maximum of sixteen units. A trail system for use by lot residents has been added. The houses line the new road and some are clustered around a green. Sheltered by the woods, houses can have privacy by keeping yards small and leaving wooded buffers between them. The new road follows the existing tree row and stone wall and can connect to the adjacent property for future development. A band of woods, consisting of small native trees transplanted from the scrub area as well as vegetation that has filled in naturally, buffers the view of the houses from the road. Many variations on this configuration are possible, including some large lots, or the addition of apartments around the farmstead. Such configurations would be allowed as long as 60% of the parcel is preserved and the total unit count does not exceed 16. Small lot clusters should follow the hamlet siting guidelines.

### Unacceptable Flexible Lot Plan for 16 Units

Not every plan which preserves 80% of the land as open space will be acceptable. Although 80% of the land is preserved by a conservation easement, these condominiums do not protect the most important open space of conservation value. The field has been crossed by a wide access road and the view has been marred by buildings that do not fit into their setting. High density housing clustered around parking lots violates the hamlet siting guidelines and is incompatible with both traditional hamlets and the countryside. This layout creates neither usable community space nor private outdoor space for residents.



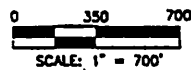
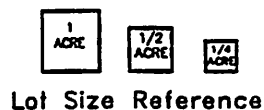
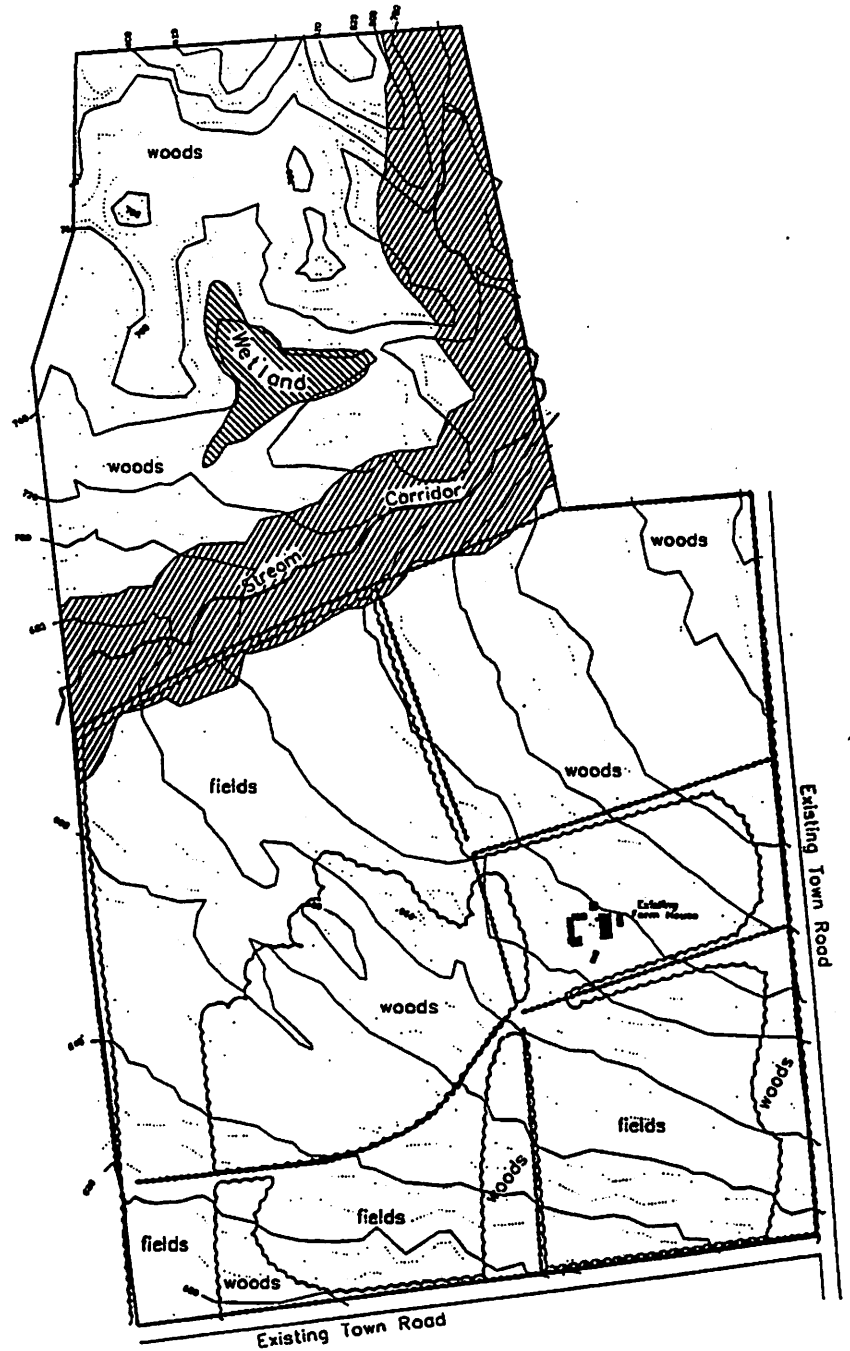
Lot Size Reference



## 200-ACRE PARCEL

### Existing Parcel

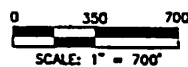
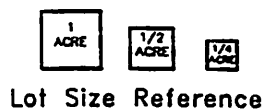
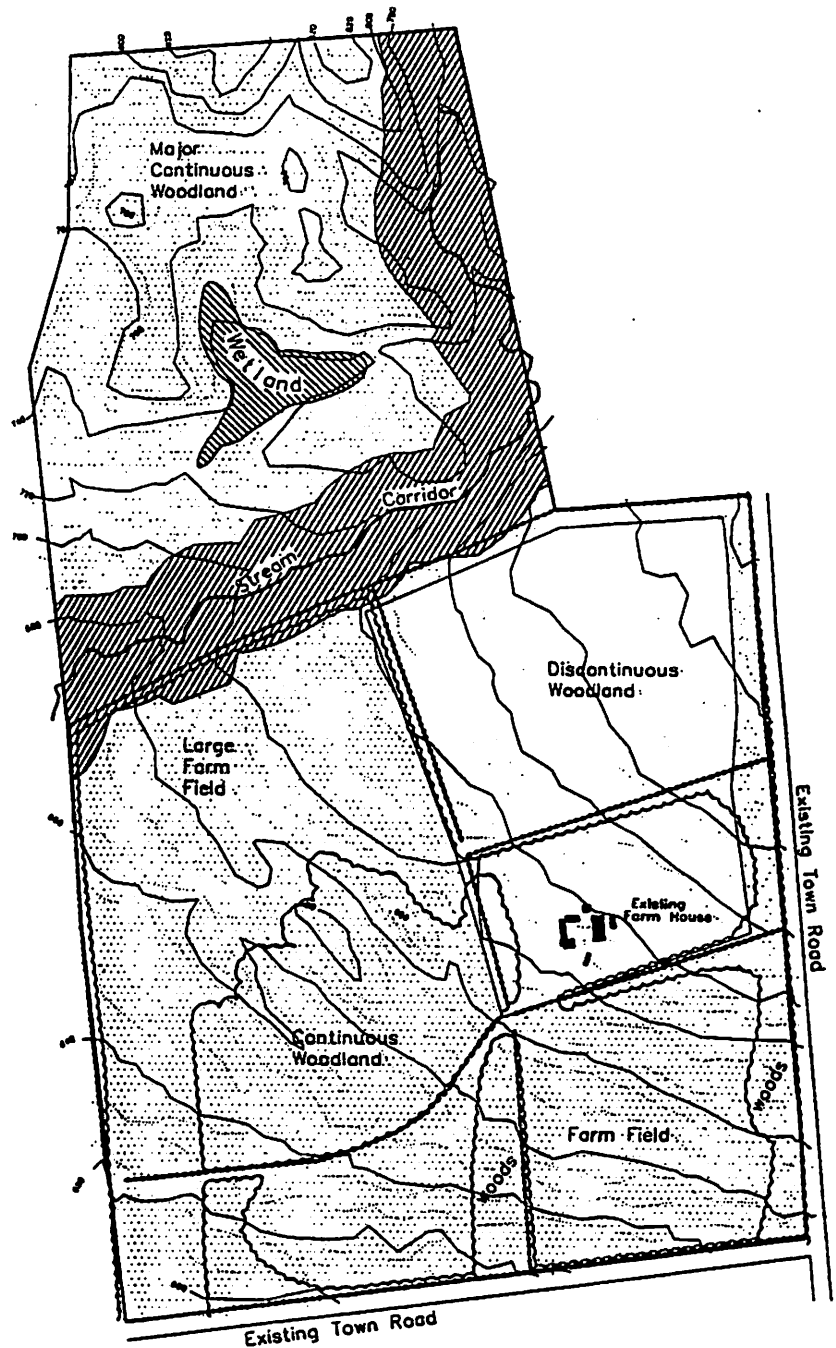
This property contains agricultural fields and woods, some steep hills and wetlands on the north end of the property, and a stream corridor. There is an existing farmstead set back from the road, and frontage on two town roads. The property is assumed to be in a county-approved Agricultural District and, therefore, in the Town's Agricultural Overlay District.



## 200-ACRE PARCEL

### Conservation Analysis

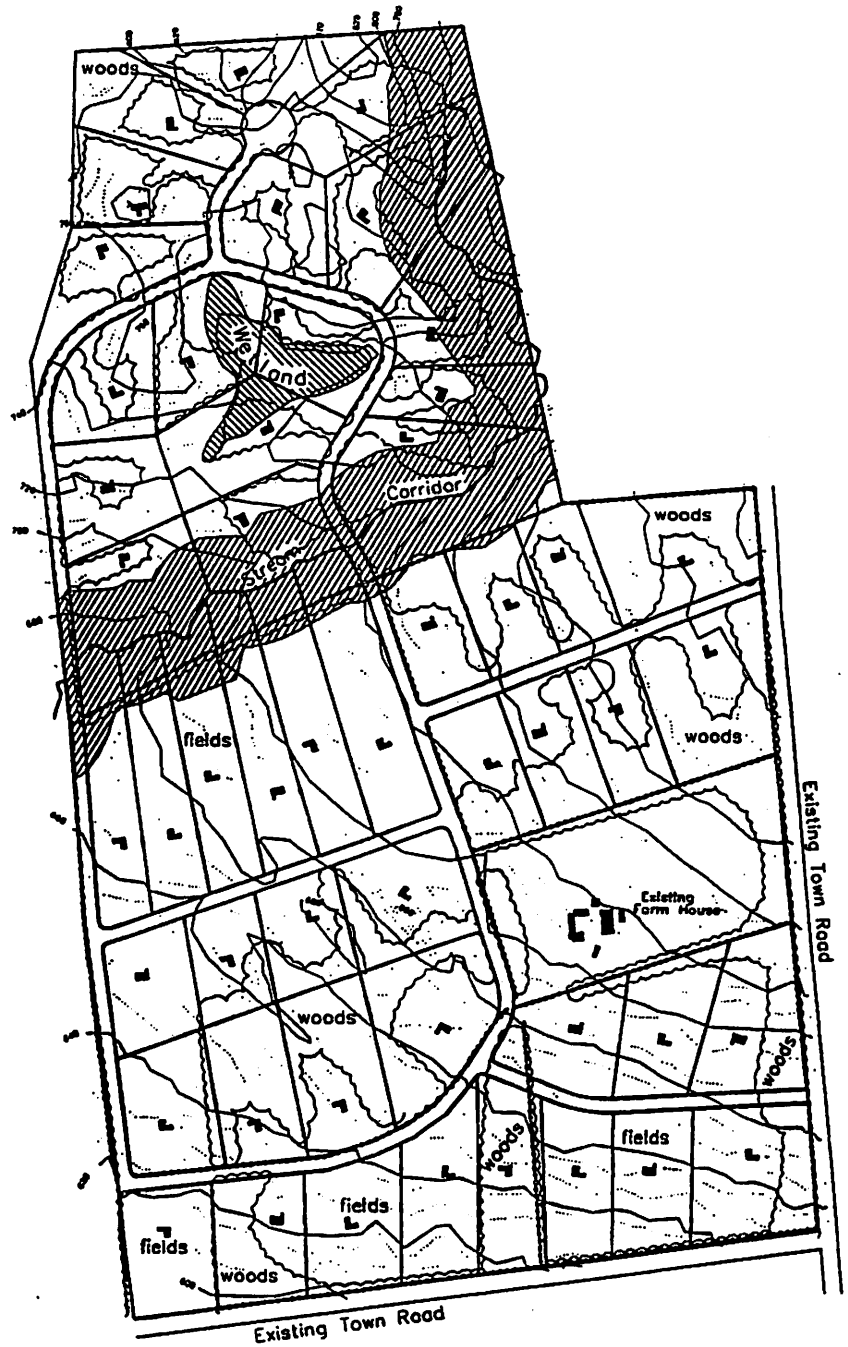
The areas of greatest conservation value include the stream corridor, wetland, and steep woodlands on the north side of the property. The farm fields have important conservation value. The view corridors along the town roads have conservation value because of their contribution to the town's scenic character. These areas of conservation value are lightly shaded on the map. The area described as "discontinuous woodland" and the field around the farm house have the least conservation value.



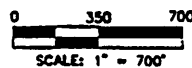
## 200-ACRE PARCEL

### Conventional 3-Acre Subdivision Plan

This conventional subdivision conforming to the 3-acre minimum lot size requirement shows that it is possible to create 51 lots. This plan cannot be approved, however, since it would develop all of the farmland and most of the other open space of conservation value. In a Flexible Lot Subdivision, up to 51 lots would be permitted as long as at least 80% of the land is preserved as open-space.



Lot Size Reference



## 200-ACRE PARCEL

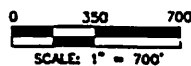
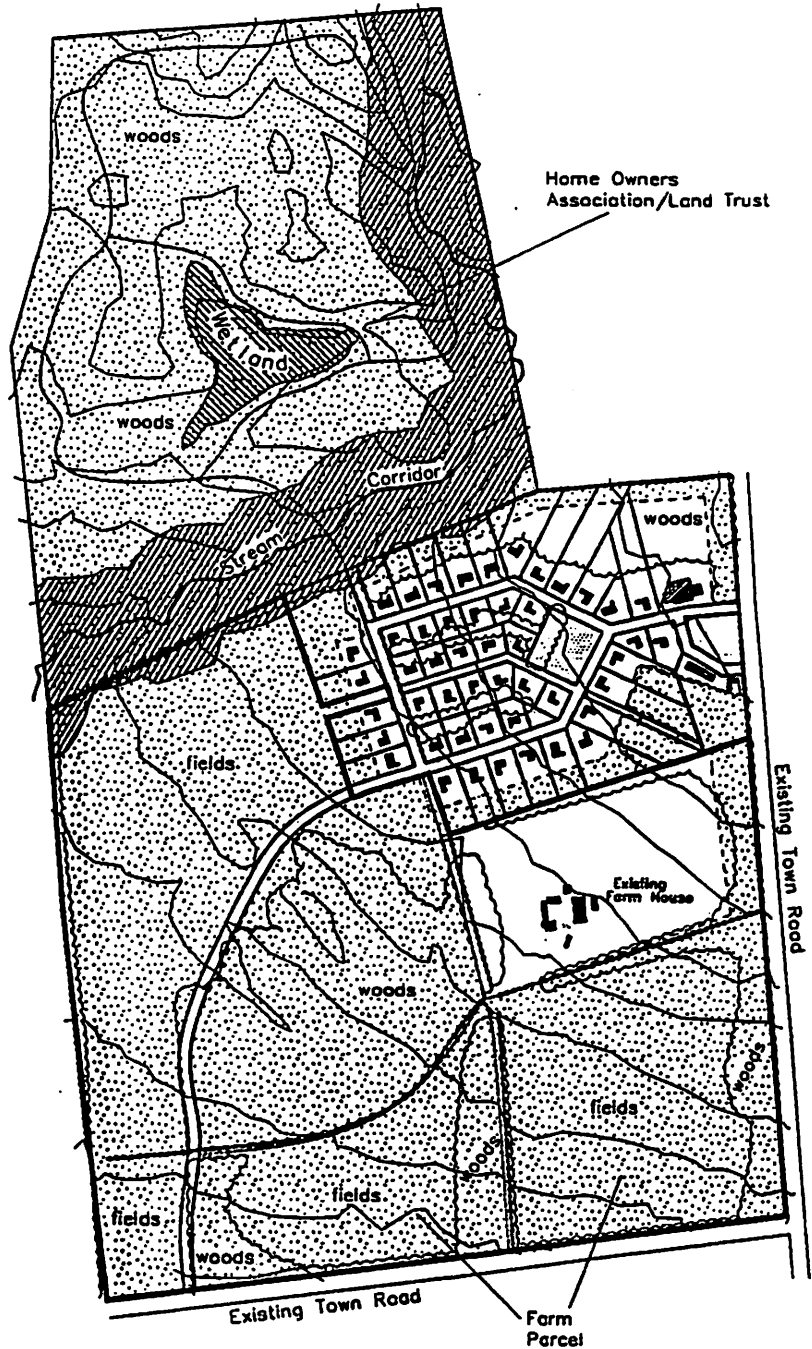
### Flexible Lot Subdivision, Mixed Use

This plan shows a close-knit mixed-use hamlet. The existing farm has been able to keep most of its land in production and remains in private ownership, subject to a conservation easement, on about one-half of the parcel. The valuable conservation land in the northern portion of the tract, now criss-crossed by trails, is also protected by a conservation easement and is owned by a homeowners' association or a non-profit land trust. The trail system (or perhaps a bicycle path) also extends through the wooded portion of the farm parcel as well.

Under this plan, the farm owner is able to realize the full development value of the farm, while keeping the farmland and continuing to farm it. He can even add some small business or light industrial activity to the existing farm complex if it would not disturb the neighboring hamlet. Employees of the farm or related businesses can live in the hamlet and walk to work.

The hamlet follows the layout principles contained in the hamlet siting guidelines. It contains commercial, office and civic uses near the existing town road. Parking spaces are provided behind buildings and on the street in front of the stores. Small greens provide neighborhood playgrounds and a focal point for this new community.

Public water and sewer facilities would be required for this plan as well as for most clustered hamlet plans. With some modern sewage treatment systems, the treated effluent could be used safely to irrigate and fertilize farm fields.



## 200-ACRE PARCEL

Flexible Lot Subdivision: Estates, Farms, and Hamlet

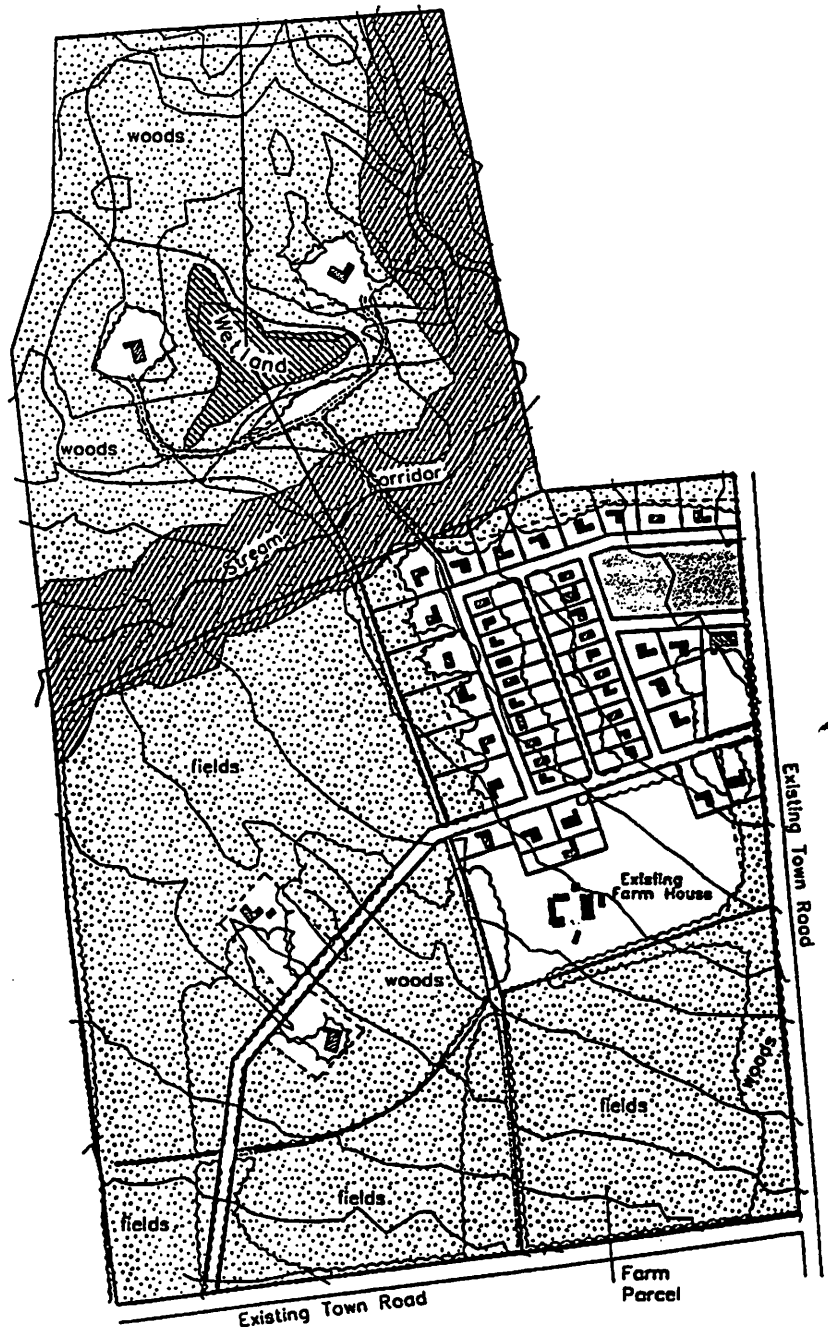
This variation combines very small lots similar to those found in the central hamlet of Hillsdale, larger suburban-size lots, and very large estate and farm parcels.

The large parcels are all restricted by conservation easement so that only one principal residence (along with typical accessory facilities) can be built on each. Two of the large parcels are primarily agricultural, two are wooded, and one combines farmland and woods. A narrow common driveway provides access to the two large parcels across the stream.

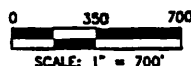
This plan provides less common open space, but preserves most of the land of conservation value. A trail system could be provided if it is properly located to avoid interfering with the privacy of the estate residences. Also, all or a portion of one of the estate lots could be made a recreational parcel for use of the homeowners or the public.

As in previous examples, the hamlet contains some non-residential uses, and a green near the town road provides public open space. Well-sited light industrial uses could be accommodated on any of the three large parcels south of the stream, even under the terms of the conservation easement.

This approach perhaps best reflects and builds upon the existing rural and village character of Hillsdale.



Lot Size Reference



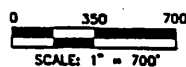
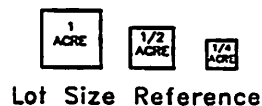
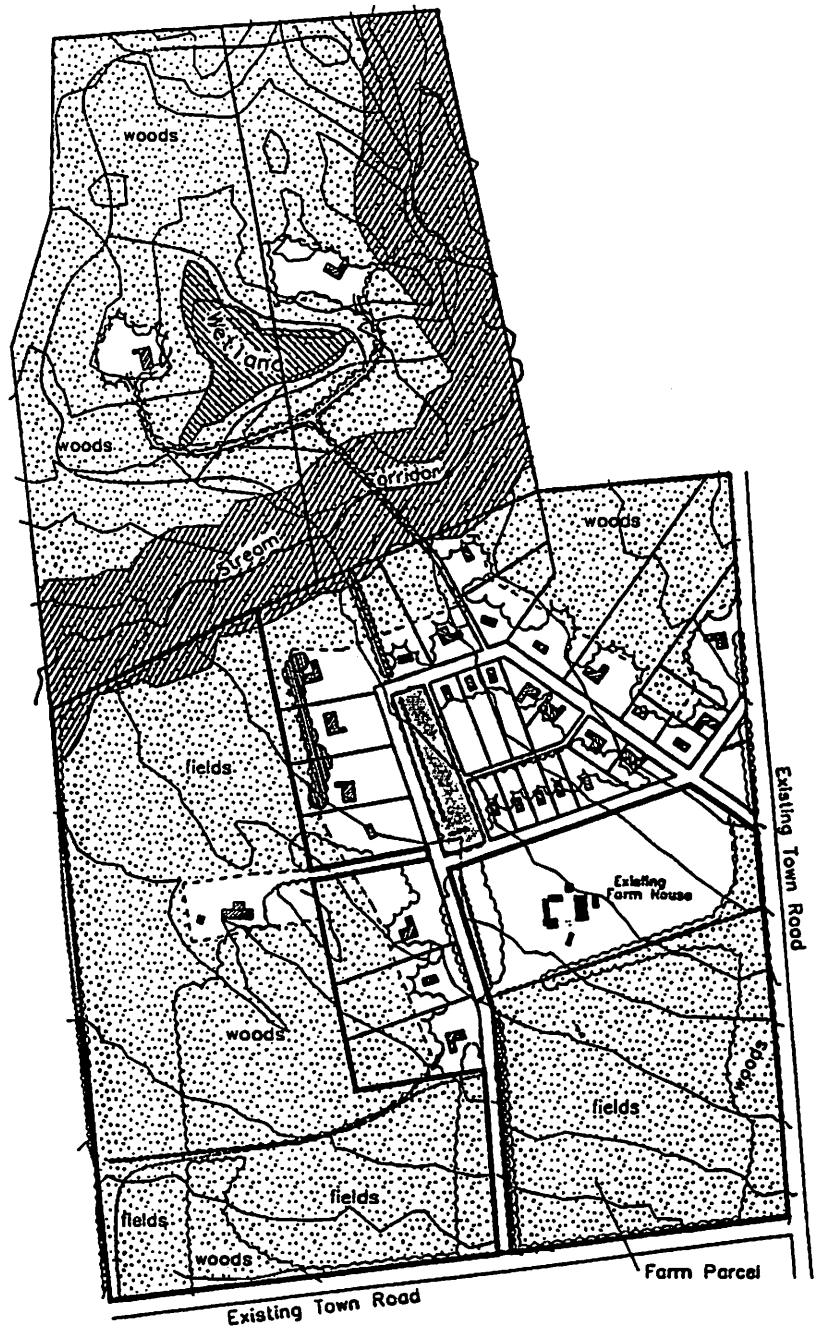


## 200-ACRE PARCEL

Flexible Lot Subdivision: Estates, Farms, and Hamlet

This is a lower-density variation of the previous illustration. In this example, it might be possible to avoid public water and sewer because the lots are large enough and the few smaller lots could share common septic systems.

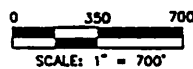
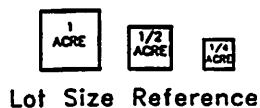
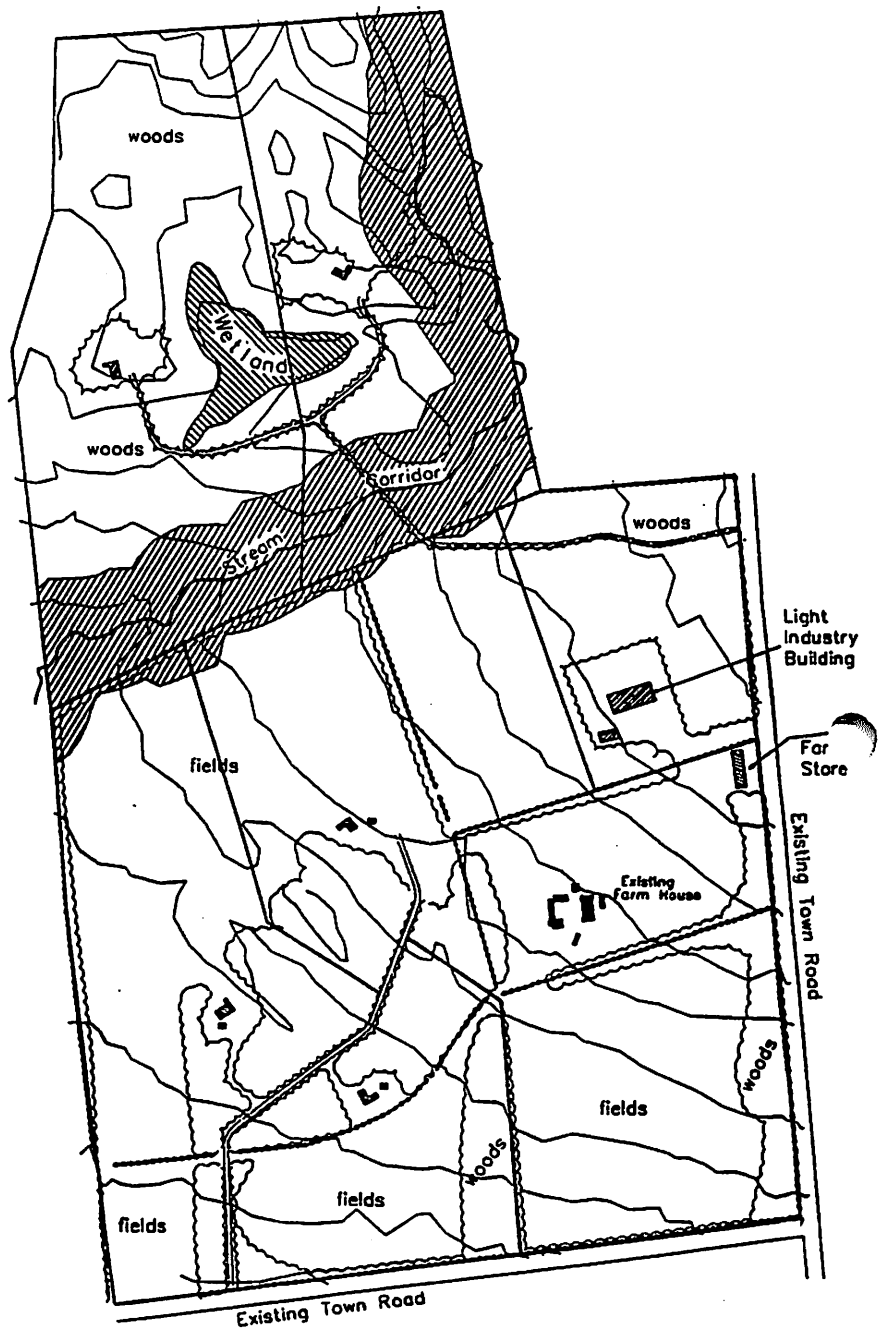
A tree buffer protects some of the new houses from the adjoining farm field. Four farm/estate parcels are shown, two of which could accommodate light industry. This plan shows the widest variety of lot sizes to meet different market demands.



## 200-ACRE PARCEL

### Flexible Lot Subdivision: Estate Lots and Light Industry

A well-buffered parcel has been created to accommodate a larger scale light industry. Two common driveways serve an additional five large lots. The existing farm remains on its own smaller parcel. A conservation easement would not necessarily be required for this plan. However, if a large industrial facility is allowed, the Planning Board may impose a conservation easement on all or most of the land as a condition of its approval. The rationale for such an easement would be to mitigate the impact of the large facility and provide the public benefit of preserved open space.

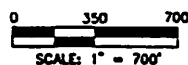
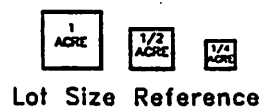
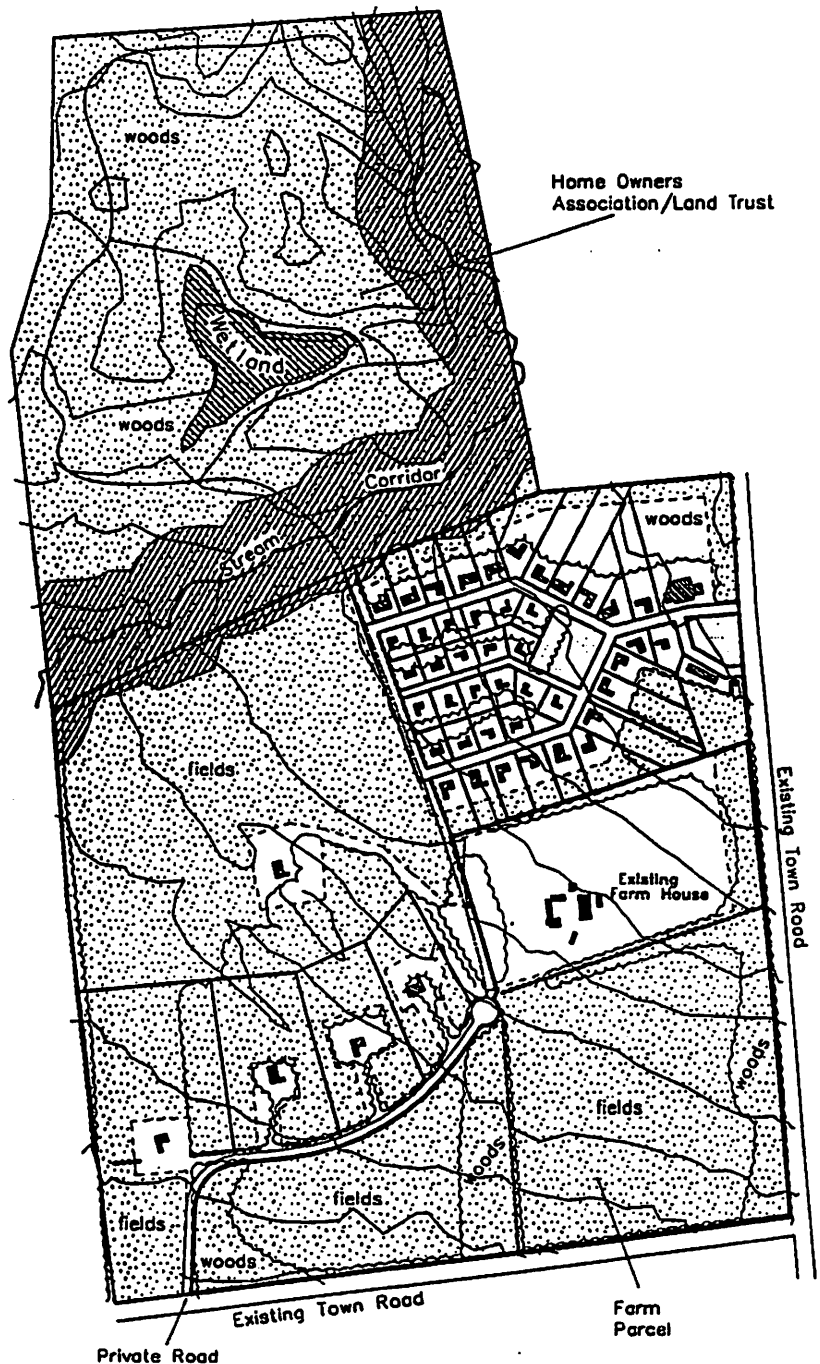


## 200-ACRE PARCEL

### Hamlet and Private Road Subdivision

A new hamlet is shown as on previous plans, with a passive recreation area owned by a land trust or homeowners' association. In addition, five high-value large lots are shown with access from a private road. This is a traditional rural private road, unpaved and only 18 feet wide. A separate homeowners' association is responsible for maintaining the road according to a recorded road maintenance agreement. A conservation easement limits density and preserves land of conservation value on the parcel.

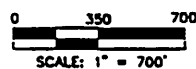
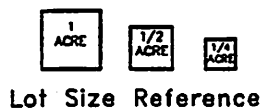
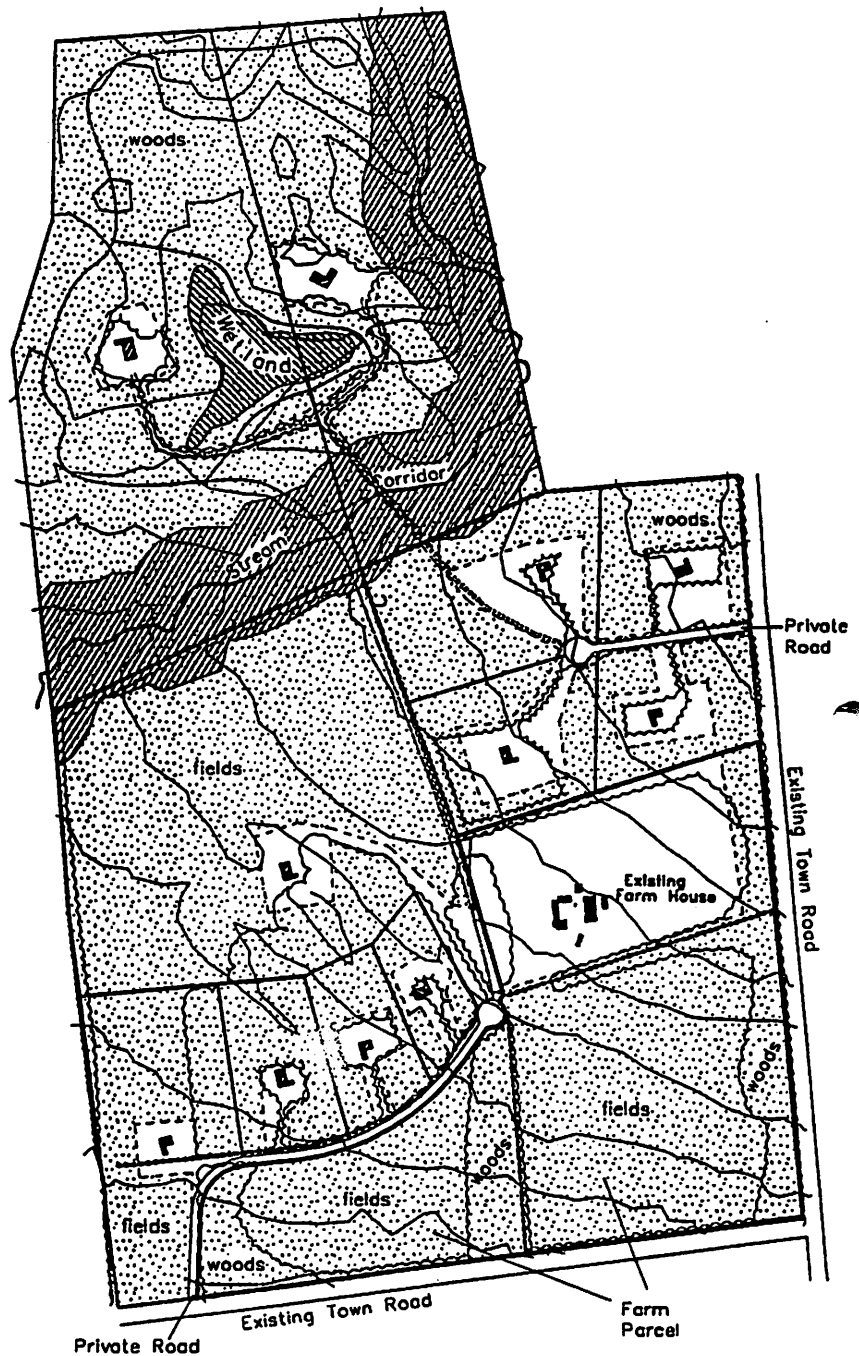
The farm owner could implement the private road subdivision component of this development herself, quickly, at low cost and high profit. The hamlet parcel could be sold to a developer for a more long-term project.



## 200-ACRE PARCEL

### Two Private Road Subdivisions

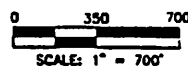
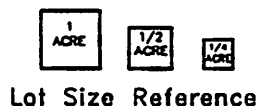
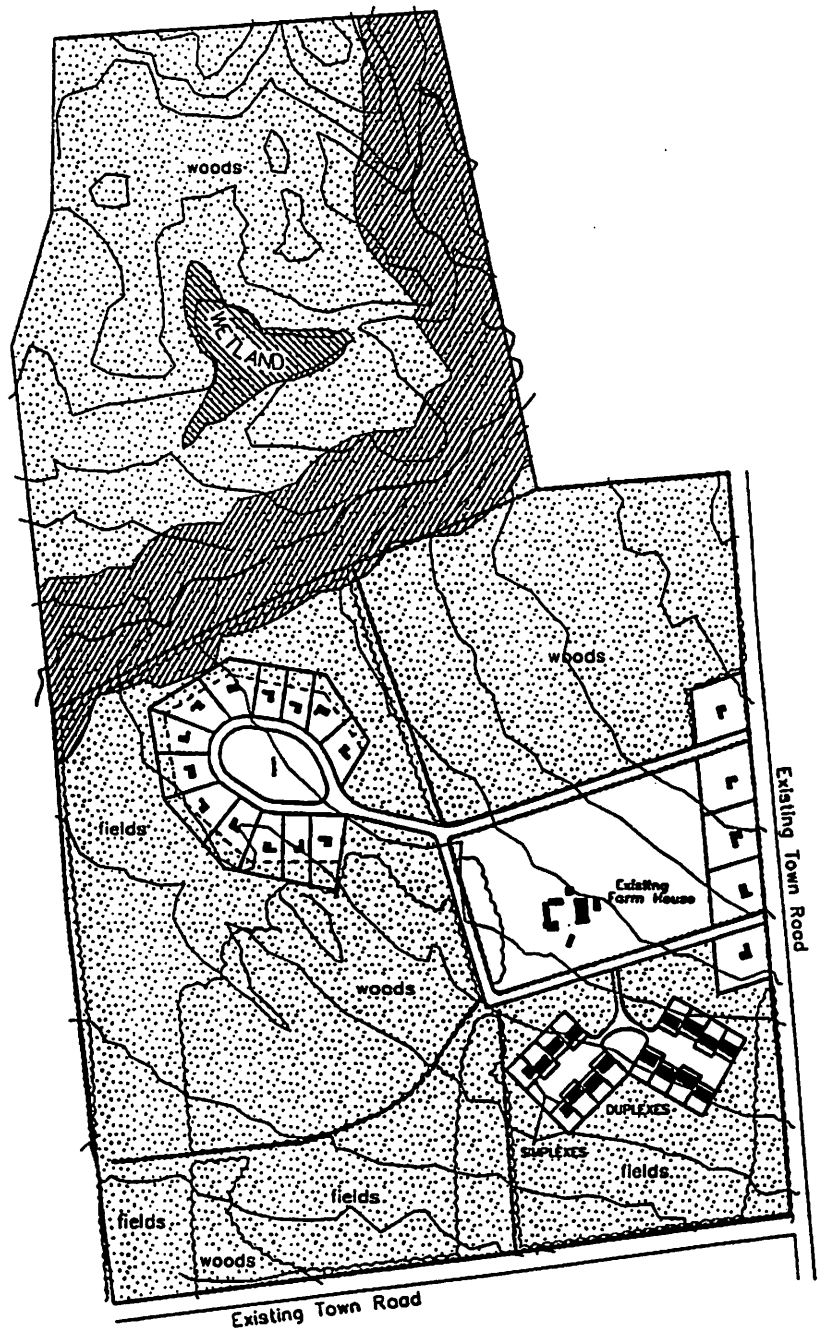
Another variation on the previous scenario would be to do a second private road subdivision in the area where the hamlet was shown, producing four more high-value large lots. In areas where most of the development pressure is for second homes in the countryside, this type of plan is often the most profitable for the landowner. It has low infrastructure costs, can be approved quickly, and will sell out much faster than a subdivision with more lots. All lots will increase in value if the landowner voluntarily imposes a conservation easement on them, because people will pay a premium to live in a "protected" rural area.



## 200-ACRE PARCEL

### Unacceptable Flexible Lot Subdivision

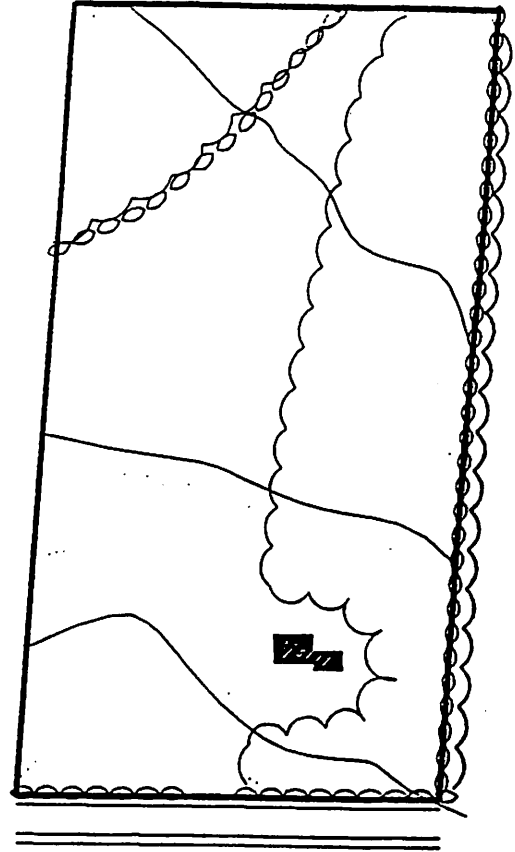
Not every plan which preserves 80% of the land as open space is acceptable. The five "frontage" lots along the road spoil the rural character of the view. The plan does not preserve the valuable agricultural fields. Although a variety of housing types are offered here, none of them follow the hamlet siting guidelines. The three developments are widely separated from one another, creating enclaves. The lack of public spaces, civic facilities, and commercial uses will prevent this development from ever becoming a community. It has also destroyed the "rural" feeling of the landscape forever.



## 8-ACRE PARCEL

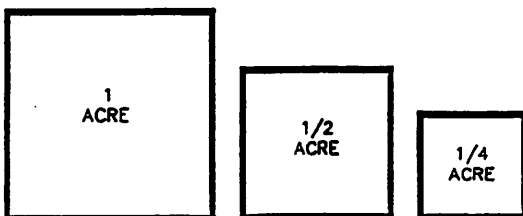
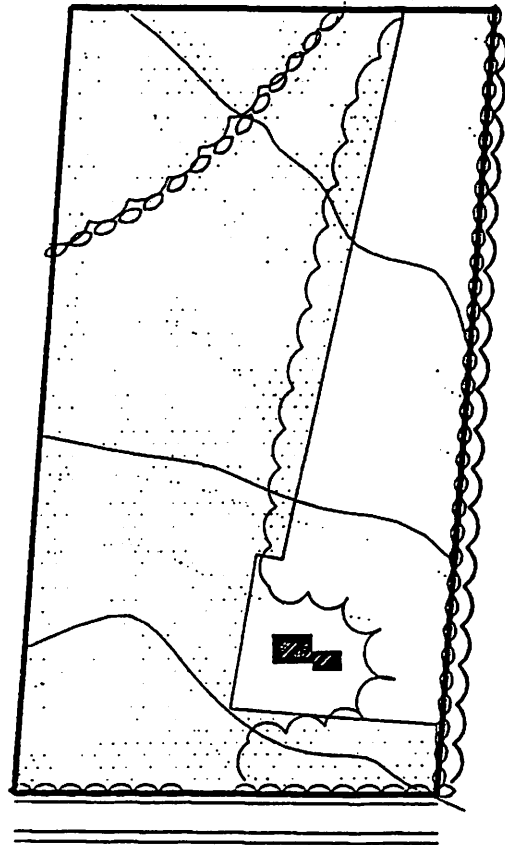
### Existing Parcel

This 8-acre parcel consists of a scenic field and a wooded area. An existing house tucked into the woods has views across the field.

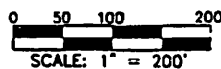


### Conservation Analysis

Significant conservation value is sometimes more difficult to establish on a small parcel than on a large one. In this case, land of conservation value includes the open fields and tree lines visible from the road and the mature forest in the rear of the parcel which is part of a larger forested area on adjoining land.



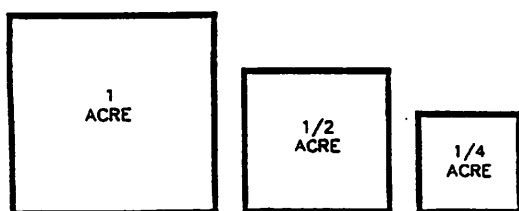
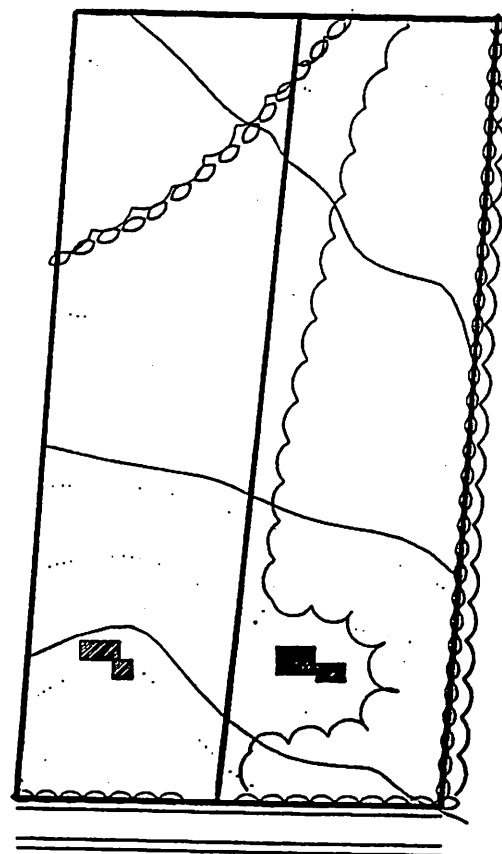
Lot Size Reference



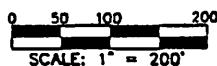
## 8-ACRE PARCEL

### Conventional 3-Acre Subdivision Plan

Under 3-acre zoning, the parcel can be divided into two lots of at least three acres each. A Flexible Lot Subdivision thus can have up to two lots (without transferring density from another parcel).



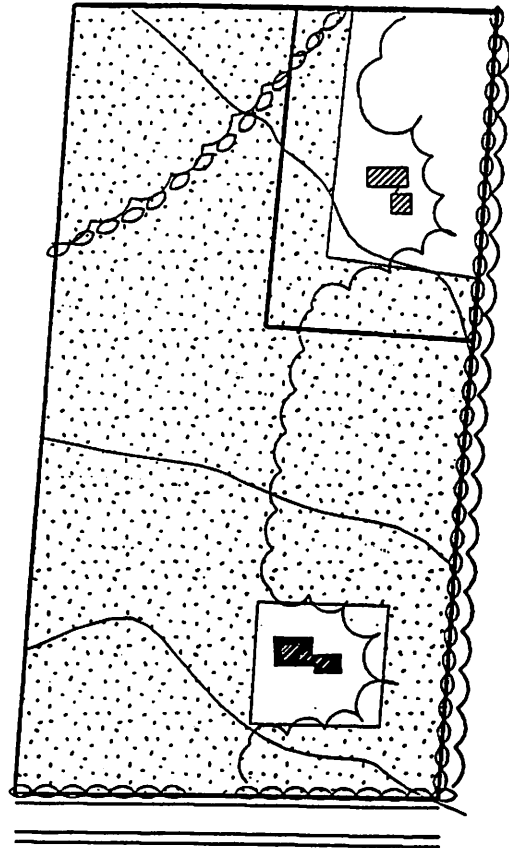
Lot Size Reference



## 8-ACRE PARCEL

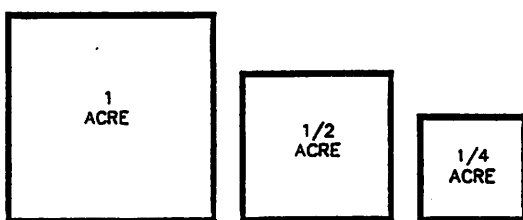
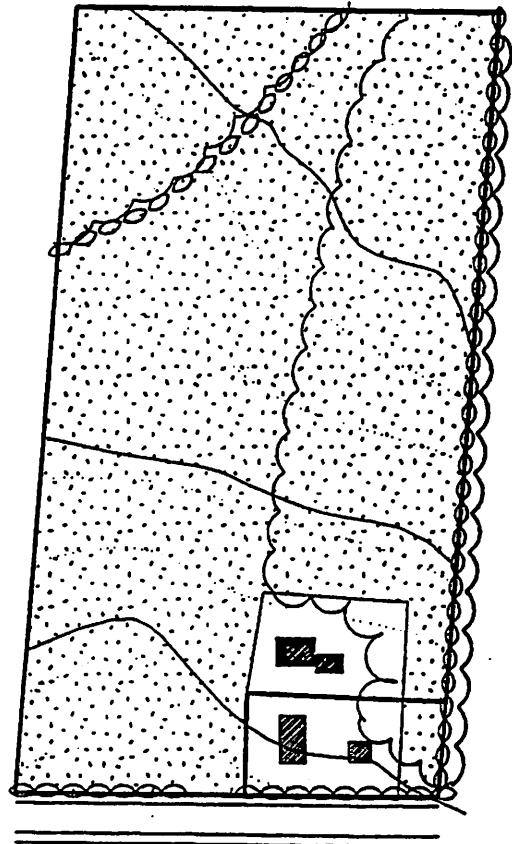
### Flexible Lot Subdivision: Rear Lot

In this example, a  $1\frac{1}{2}$ -acre lot is created in the back of the parcel, with access gained by a right-of-way easement across the remaining  $6\frac{1}{2}$  acres. 80% of the parcel is preserved as restricted open space by conservation easement.



### Flexible Lot Subdivision: Front Lot

An alternative configuration would place a half-acre lot in the front of the property, close to the road, in the traditional pattern of rural development. This lot has a short driveway and could be an inexpensive homesite. It would be desirable (but not required) for a house built on such a lot to follow the basic principles in the Building Form Guidelines. 80% of the entire 8-acre parcel (excluding the private yards of the houses) must be protected as open space.



Lot Size Reference

