

## Replanting Cranberry

BY KEN CHIACCHIA

*On a brisk fall day in 1995, I was hiding in the bottom of a gully, playing the role of a "lost person" in a drill for our volunteer search-and-rescue team. I was waiting for Lilly, our black-and-tan German shepherd, and my wife, Heather, to find me. And as Lilly topped the dirt pile next to my hole, I could see that she hadn't smelled me yet, didn't know I was there.*

*But a moment later, I realized that "Lilly's" tail seemed too fluffy, even brush-like. "Lilly" was a dark-coated female coyote, who had come so close only because the wind was blowing my scent away from her.*

*Our eyes met for the briefest of moments; and she dematerialized. There's no other way to describe the soundless, instantaneous way that coyotes have of getting out of Dodge when you've surprised them.*

*She was as close as any free, wild animal has ever come to me. When it was over, I wasn't sure it had actually happened.*

*And all of this took place in a then-incomplete office development on Executive Drive, out in Cranberry Township. My hiding space had been dug out with a backhoe.*

*Even today, Cranberry retains some rugged rural terrain amidst the strip malls and drive-throughs. Cranberry may be a synonym for "suburban sprawl" for many, but local officials are trying to preserve those places -- and environmentalists give them high marks for the effort.*

*Still, finding a connection with nature is a lot like my coyote encounter: If you blink, you may miss it.*



*Developers Don Rodgers Sr. and Don Rodgers Jr. are taking a new approach to the landscape with Park Place.*

Heather Mull

Heather and I came to the Pittsburgh area in 1993 partly because it had so much green. We were impressed that, from Downtown, you could drive in most directions and hit rural America in about 20 minutes (barring traffic). Still, by the time we moved into a 35-year-old ranch house in Cranberry in 1995, the township already had a reputation for over-development. Particularly starting with the completion of I-279 in the late '80s, wooded areas along the Route 19 corridor were disappearing beneath an advancing tide of asphalt.

We weren't the only ones buying homes there, clearly. Cranberry's explosive population growth -- from 14,816 in 1990 to 23,625 in 2000, according to U.S. Census data -- happened at the same time that the population of Pittsburgh's metropolitan area dropped, from 2.47 to 2.43 million. The region wasn't growing; it was metastasizing.

Cranberry itself, meanwhile, "had that moniker as a poster child for sprawl," acknowledges John Trant, Cranberry's planning officer. Even newcomers like Heather and I began worrying about over-development.

Already, though, Cranberry was beginning to get its act together. Few outsiders noticed, but by the mid-1990s, the township was "actually laying the groundwork for a new type of land management," says Trant. Its first step, taken early in the decade, was to enact a local "transportation impact fee." If you developed a parcel of land, you had to pay to improve the roads leading to it, so the township had the infrastructure to handle the traffic your development would create.

"The developers who were running the show in the early '90s ... didn't like that," Trant says. "So we were sued."

Local officials, the developers contended, didn't have the power to charge such fees. But "[a]s a result of that litigation ... the state adopted impact-fee legislation," Trant explains. Harrisburg changed planning laws to specifically allow for the transportation fees ... as well as a *recreational* impact fee, which local officials can use to demand green space for recreational use as well. Cranberry soon enacted those fees, too.

By themselves, the fees might have had only a marginal impact on the new developments. Better roads might only speed more development. And suburbanites who travel by car everywhere might drive right past parks and other green space. The key ingredient wasn't attaching new requirements to developments; it was allowing developments to serve more than one function at a time.

For decades, local zoning laws were monolithic. A site could be zoned for residential use, or for commercial purposes, but not both. The idea was to create residential areas free of noisy commercial neighbors and the traffic they bring. But the result was a community that segregated people from services they needed ... requiring them to drive to strip malls and other development. Walkable communities and corner stores became a mere memory.

"In the 'bad old days' ... the township was [focusing] on segregating land uses as opposed to allowing for traditional neighborhood development and mixed-land use," says Court Gould, of Sustainable Pittsburgh, which worked with Cranberry on its plans. "The next evolution is to form ... codes focused not on what use you're going to allow in an area, but what kind of community you'd like to see develop."

Cranberry's initial zoning changes, enacted in 2002, allowed "mixed use" development intended to put smaller businesses within walking distance of peoples' homes. In 2008, a further change eliminated township-specified numbers requiring fixed numbers of residential and commercial units. Instead of setting hard targets, developers could present the township with more flexible plans designed to combine residences, businesses and green space. They goal: a real neighborhood that encouraged people to walk, bike and generally get outside.

How close has Cranberry gotten to achieving that? The first time I called Gould on his cell phone, he was accompanying municipal planners on a tour of Cranberry's new developments, which have become a model for other areas in the region.

*For us, possibly the biggest selling point for Cranberry lay across Rochester Road: the fallow remnants of a roughly 400-acre farm that offered a mix of fields, woods, hills and marsh.*

*On cross-country skiing trips, I'd start at the coffin-liner plant on Alps Avenue, crossing a bit of bramble field into trees and negotiating a series of gentle bends and dips. And then ...*

*The Hill. It wasn't that big. But it was a hundred yards of steep and narrow, with a leftward curve at the bottom so that, with a little force on your trailing ski, you could stay on the trail and out of the brambles, whizzing around in a display of shushing finesse.*

*Today, the trail and the surrounding trees are gone. The Hill itself has been bulldozed flat. It sits in the center of the Belle Vue Park housing development. On a recent trip back, I needed a GPS unit to figure out where it had been.*



A concrete -- pardon the pun -- example of Cranberry's new zoning approach is the Park Place development on Powell Road, just northwest of Belle Vue. Developed by Creative Real Estate, Park Place will eventually feature a mix of 400 single-family houses, 42 townhouses and 300 apartment buildings ranging from four to 36 units apiece. There will also be 12,000 square feet of retail space, occupying the ground levels of the apartment buildings. Most innovative, perhaps, are the "live/work units," which pair a first floor of workspace with a second floor of residential space. The design is specifically tailored for family-owned businesses.

Park Place paid impact fees to the township: about \$815,000 in recreation fees and \$1 million in transportation fees. But as Don Rodgers of Creative Real Estate points out, the new spirit of zoning flexibility extends to fees as well. The township asked the company to pay for road improvements outside the development, and to build a road connecting the new construction to Graham Park. In return, Cranberry reduced the in-site fees by the cost of those off-site projects. To ice the cake, Creative Real Estate donated 50 of Park Place's original 200 acres to the township to expand the park's size.

"The nice thing about dealing with Cranberry Township ... is that they're very professional and highly organized," Rodgers says. "They try to give you good direction and they're very cooperative in developing quality projects."

And while businesses usually oppose regulation, Rodgers says the clarity of Cranberry's codes make the township easier to work with than places that have fewer rules, but place unexpected roadblocks in a chaotic and expensive (for everyone) manner.

Rodgers also sees an opportunity to make some green while being green. "I want to have a better mousetrap than my competitor," he says. "Quality green space is a benefit to the community ... it gives me a competitive edge."

As Dar Williams sings, "'Cause the market resists and the market absorbs." In Cranberry, at least, developers are cottoning to the idea that a huge segment of the home-buying public doesn't *want* a McMansion on a postage stamp of bare earth, a 10-minute drive from an asphalt jungle of chain stores and eateries seized by bumper-to-bumper traffic. They want *neighborhoods*, with parks and trees and businesses that at least pretend to be local.

*Cranberry planning officer John Trant is helping map out a new approach to development.*

Heather Mull

"People are willing to pay for green," Gould agrees.

In the current economic climate, of course, there are no guarantees. The small-business spaces in Park Place may never get sold, and if businesses do get started there, they might not survive in the shadow of the big-box stores less than three miles away, on Route 19. But at this point, a late-'80s-style Cranberry development of trophy houses seems no more likely to flourish.

Trant cites a study that suggests an 89 percent approval rate among township residents for the current development plan. Its popularity is hardly surprising. It is, after all, the suburban American dream reclaimed. It's what most of them thought they were signing up for in the first place. What's more, it was crafted with the help of numerous stakeholders, including the residents themselves.

You can find Cranberry's overall 30-year development plan at [www.cranberryplan.org](http://www.cranberryplan.org). It's consistent with, and has goals similar to, a regional plan for development throughout Southwestern Pennsylvania (at [www.spcregion.org/trans\\_lrp.shtml](http://www.spcregion.org/trans_lrp.shtml)). Both the local and regional plans have received awards from planning groups and federal agencies.

Cranberry's plan protects 2,088 acres of current green space, and sets aside an additional 3,298 acres for future protection. If the plan is followed, most of the still-undeveloped land in Cranberry will remain green space forever.

Even so, nearly two-thirds of Cranberry's 15,000 acres have *already* been developed. And from the viewpoint of Heather and I, there's a problem with how Cranberry defines "green space." Most of it will be developed green space, such as formal playing fields and other types of mowed grass, rather than trees and undisturbed meadows.

Cranberry's Trant points out that "We want to create a true system of greenways ... for natural-resource protection as well as recreational use," including the kind of freeform "passive use" that Heather and I love.

As Rodgers puts it, "You're not going to find parcels of land in Cranberry Township that are large enough to have large stands of trees." Maps of Park Place make the green areas look quite large -- and if you count the lawn-like fields, they will be. But there are generally only enough trees to

screen off the next development, not enough to form what I'd call a stomping ground. Such stands, like the rest of the green space envisioned by the plan, is fragmented and incomplete, by the standards of people who like to take hour-long mountain-bike rides.

"The reality is, growth is demand-driven," Rodgers explains. "The community is located in proximity to high-growth areas." Residents "are going to get the growth whether they want it or not." Gould and Trant said virtually the same thing. Cranberry can retain some green. But it can't go back to being rural. .

Some of my favorite places in Cranberry were doomed a decade before I set eyes on them. In fact, they were doomed by the very thing that made it possible for me to see them: the construction of a highway that made commuting to the city possible. Even in the greenest of contexts, that constrained what had to follow.

*I remember my last day on the Rochester Road farm. Biking through the woods, which were increasingly being uprooted by the growing clear-cut areas, I came upon a new dirt road -- the same road, in fact, being paved to connect Park Place with the park itself. Sitting on that road was a guy on a quad ATV.*

*Ordinarily, this wouldn't have been a welcome sight. I didn't deny ATV-riders their "right" to travel trails that I didn't own either. It's just that they could turn a trail into a series of muddy ruts that ate up bicycle wheels. But today there was none of that resentment. We nodded, smiled, brothers at last.*

*In the coming week, most of the woods would be gone.*

Last year, Heather and I bought 26 acres in Lancaster Township, about 15 minutes north of Cranberry on Route 19. We have a 110-year-old farmhouse, a small barn, a pole building, and a mix of fields, pasture and woods. More than half of the property is wooded. Now we have chickens, ducks, turkeys and a couple of milk goats. This winter, we'll get a brush hog and start linking the deer trails into a system that we can mountain-bike and ski.

It's a hobby farm, probably not capable of paying its own mortgage. I'm not letting go of the day job. And yes, I understand what a carbon-footprint hole my commute to Pittsburgh represents.

In fact, while I might fault the shortcomings in Cranberry's plan, I criticize it at my peril.

Heather and I never wanted the suburban life; we wanted the rural life. But our farm is just two townships north of Cranberry. So if it -- and the existence of a rural way of life in Western Pennsylvania -- is to survive, we're going to have to concentrate our development rather than allow it to go on sprawling. The compactness of Cranberry's new developments, and their offer of a green fix, may not just be better for the people who live there. They may be the lifeline for rural areas that lay beyond.

The more extensively, and smartly, Cranberry is developed, the more effective will be efforts to prevent the concrete spreading northward.

Cranberry's change in direction "was a turning point for our area," says Gould. Cranberry's new approach may only half-satisfy me, Gould says. Even so, he adds, it's the beginning of the ever-higher standards of development. "[It] called for a smart growth ... that directs growth to existing communities" rather than encouraging construction of new developments into presently rural areas.

"There's a nice convergence of the development community following consumer interest and demand," he adds. By creating the kind of green space that the average suburbanite wants -- just enough trees you don't have to experience your neighbors as a vast field of cookie-cutter houses -- it should, by design, draw development, taking pressure off presently rural areas.

Still one thing worries me. I-79 is just a few minutes from my house. Right now, the access it offers is distinctly commuter-unfriendly: The exchange lacks a south-facing ramp you'd use to get to and from the city. But PennDOT is planning to fix that, beginning construction of a full interchange this February.

This time, Heather and I got here first. But what's going on around your land inevitably constrains what you can do on it. And the interchange is scheduled for completion sometime in 2011.

What then?