

Planner reinventing tradition with an eye toward preservation

By Dana M. Nichols
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Record Staff Writer

VALLEY SPRINGS - If there were a Hall of Fame for regional land-use planners, Randall Arendt's name would be there.

Arendt has studied and practiced urban and regional design for more than 40 years, and his book, "Rural By Design, Maintaining Small Town Character," is on the American Planning Association's short list of recommended reference books for planners.

Arendt also is one of the founders of a movement called Conservation Design, which helps rural landowners develop their land at full allowable density, reduce infrastructure costs and conserve large areas of undeveloped farm land, habitat, or other open space.

Soon, Arendt will be coming to Valley Springs to help the community come up with a plan to beautify the community, reduce traffic jams and revive the town center.

Arendt is part of a team assembled for that project by EDAW, an international design company hired to facilitate several months of public meetings beginning in May.

One telling aspect of Arendt's career is he is sought by conservationists and community activists who want a better-designed future and by developers hoping for more profitable projects.

Arendt draws some of his ideas from his time working in the United Kingdom as a planner. He witnessed the strict rules that kept villages and towns separated by miles of open countryside there. He also saw how British towns were designed to be compact and had stores and other services within walking distance of homes.

"I got to see planning being done in a very, very different way. I got back to this country and I said, 'Maybe we can't do that, but what can we do?'"

Arendt said conservation design and a reinvention of traditional town design are the answers. But it has to be done in a distinctively American way, because tradition and law here put a premium on property rights.

Arendt said strict growth boundaries and attempts to mandate areas of open space usually are doomed to fail here because many rural landowners view their property as a retirement account - the easiest way to cash out is to carve the land into chunks and sell it to city folks.

Arendt's solution: Let the property owners cash out for the full allowable density. If that means carving 100 acres into 20 5-acre lots, so be it.

At the same time, set high design standards and loosen regulatory restrictions so density can be placed where it will create the most attractive community, including large scenic vistas that are permanently preserved.

In the end, conservation design usually means smaller home lots, but amenities such as horse trails, farmland, lakes or recreation trails are saved.

Loosening or changing some regulations is key. Many county codes, including the one in Calaveras County, generally require residential streets to be too wide to create the kind of narrow-street traditional neighborhoods that have higher resale values.

A number of public- and private-sector planners in Calaveras County said they are interested in hearing Arendt's ideas.

"Guys like this who can think outside the box can come up with some practical solutions," said Dave Tanner, a private land planner and golf course designer who has consulted on a number of projects in Valley Springs and elsewhere in California.

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Learn more

- Randall Arendt: www.greenerprospects.com
- Rural subdivisions Arendt designed: www.centerville-florida.com and www.sugarcreekpreserve.com
- Conservation subdivisions: www.landchoices.org/