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PRACTICE WORK-AT-HOME VILLAGES



Work-at-Home Villages

By Robert A. Graham

Changes in the workplace, including increased acceptance of telecommuting and the aging of the workforce—as large numbers of baby boomers continue to work beyond the retirement age—have opened an opportunity to rethink housing development to meet evolving work demands and lifestyles.

One possible solution is a “work-at-home” village that provides a comfortable and convenient environment for working retirees and other professionals who choose to work out of their homes as an alternative to commuting to conventional commercial office space.

This work-at-home village concept is physically and perhaps emotionally different from common types of live/work districts and ad hoc home occupations in residential districts. The work-at-home village is specifically designed to accommodate both residential and commercial activity with the basic appearance of a residential subdivision. Part of the village’s environment and amenities would include the normal amenities that are an important part of working in an office and are part of sharing creativity. While some routine face-to-face contact has been replaced by social media websites and virtual meeting platforms, gathering together is an important part of community life. Consequently, the work-at-home village would include a gathering place in the form of a village center with some limited retail and personal services and meeting space.

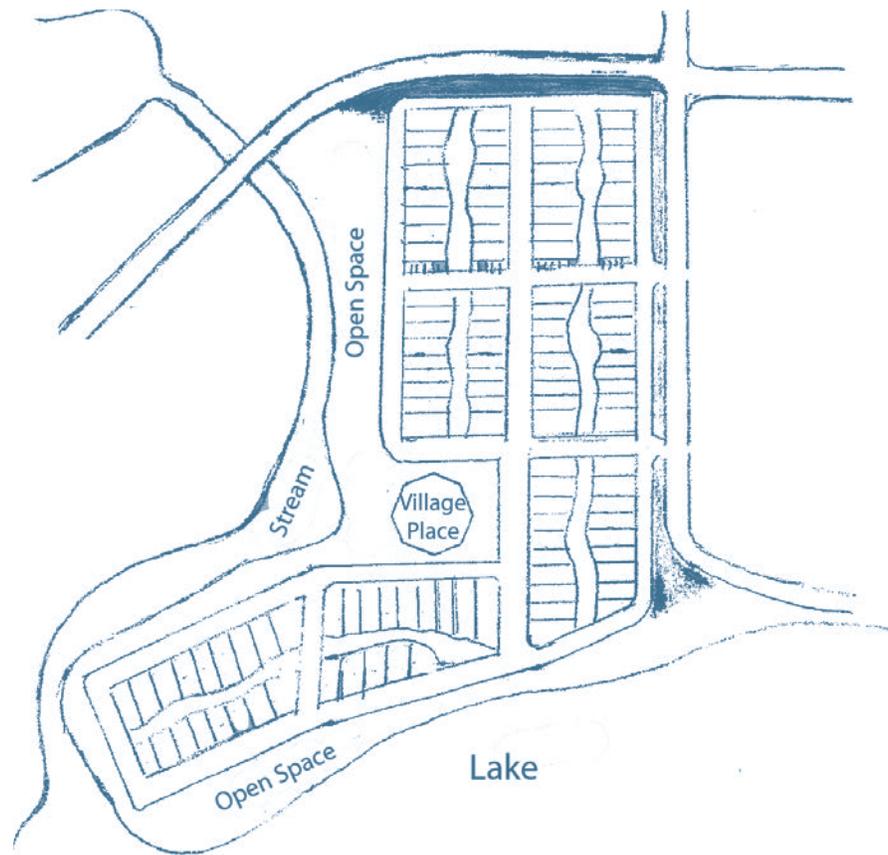
The work-at-home village is a compact subdivision within a larger community and the concept can apply to a greenfield site or an in-town redevelopment such as a former industrial site. The village would not be divided by arterial streets and could be compared in concept to a golf course subdivision.

The purposes of this article are to explain the key components of the work-at-home village, to discuss the challenges and barriers that

traditional zoning and subdivision regulations pose to developing these villages, and to outline the approach cities and counties can use to enable work-at-home development through their local subdivision and zoning regulations.

THE NEED

Retirees who desire to continue in the workforce or turn a hobby into an income source may seek forms of housing and community life that are not currently provided in the market-



➔ Work-at-home village concept sketch: 60 acres, 112 units.

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About the Author

Robert A. Graham is a 1967 graduate of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and has served as a city planner and community development director for 46 years. He served in Chemung County/Elmira, New York; St. Louis Park, Minnesota; and Albert Lea, Minnesota. Graham is a charter member of APA, has been active on the Minnesota Chapter board, and recently received the chapter’s Lifetime Achievement Award. He has retired from government and is not an independent consultant.

place. The typical three-bedroom suburban home may no longer meet the family’s needs and is not easily converted to a workplace. Furthermore, their current home may not easily accommodate assistance equipment such as wheelchairs, walkers, and scooters.

The housing proposed in the work-at-home village would include universal accessibility design standards to promote independent living. However, this concept is not just for retirees and may meet the needs of those with physical challenges and others simply choosing to work from their home.

Numerous professional service firms already encourage working from home as a way to minimize costs associated with acquiring and maintaining office space. Other firms use shared office space for the same reason. Meanwhile, many companies employ individuals with physical limitations whose ideal working environment may be in the work-at-home village.

Many cities and small towns in the Northeast and Midwest face the risk of losing knowledgeable and experienced residents to retirement-friendly communities in the Sun Belt. Communities that promote housing alternatives that enable residents to age (and work) in place would likely have a competitive advantage over conventional bedroom suburbs in retaining and attracting residents.

Professionals who work from home need to make physical, social, and psychological transitions from the conventional office environment. Working from home involves a potential decrease in social interaction in ex-

change for greater flexibility in work schedule. Working from home is also often associated with increased family responsibilities, such as home, child, or partner care that may have been outsourced previously. Interruptions from family members may make it more difficult to be creative and efficient. Consequently, an environment specifically designed for work-at-home professionals could be an important part of making a successful transition.

THE VISION

The single-family detached home that many baby boomers grew up in offers three bedrooms, a kitchen, family space, a basement, a garage, and a driveway for a couple of vehicles. Retirement housing, often considered downsizing, offers various forms of living including two-bedroom duplexes or town homes, apartments, retirement communities with services, and manufactured home communities.

In these developments home office space options are often limited to a guest bedroom, basement, or, in some cases, garages. These nontraditional workspaces frequently suffer from a shortage of daylight or privacy. Bedroom spaces may have access and egress issues, and as workers age, they may also present safety issues. Basements may require remodeling and replumbing to create suitable space.

In contrast, a work-at-home village is designed from the outset to facilitate working at home. The prototypical unit is a twin home (i.e., two attached single-family residences on individual lots). This prototype is just one example, and each work-at-home village

would likely be comprised of a variety of unit types designed to accommodate both living and working. All units would be designed to meet suggested standards for accessibility. Additionally, the work-at-home village would include play spaces and a centrally located village gathering place with some convenience commercial activities. All community features would be accessible. In most instances, a resident association would take responsibility for maintaining yards and common areas.

It is important to note that a work-at-home village differs from common conceptualizations of live/work districts. While the goal of most live/work districts is to provide space for artists, artisans, and shopkeepers to live above or behind their publicly visible and accessible workplaces, the work-at-home village combines living and working space while retaining the appearance of a residential development and the compactness of a village lifestyle.

The vision of a work-at-home village is also different from a neighborhood that happens to have a high concentration of home-based businesses. The vision also recreates the small village with the village green but the green becomes the central village gathering place. Instead of having some services on the edge of the community, the services and gathering place are in the center to facilitate interactions among neighbors. The gathering place would include a coffee shop, small conference center, exercise facilities, administrative support services, child and adult day care, and depending on its proximity to a commercial center, convenience food and fuel service.

Because a work-at-home village buyer would be a knowledgeable investor understanding how the village is intended to function, neighbor conflicts over business activities within the homes and at the village gathering place would be minimal. In fact, the environment for the investor is more stable than in a typical residential subdivision where various accessory nonresidential uses may creep into the neighborhood over time through conditional use approvals and variances, which in extreme cases can make homes harder to market and may result in a reduction of property values.

While many larger apartment projects also incorporate space for home offices, these projects are typically located close to downtowns or neighborhoods with easy access to services, and the office spaces in these units are usually small dens. The work-at-home village differs in that those still seeking single-family living would also be able to experience the village concept instead of a suburban subdivision with a shopping center at the edge. The village gathering place (village place) becomes the social center of the village in the same way that the clubhouse may become the center of a golf course community.

The work-at-home concept could become the new normal for multiple generations. Communities that embrace this concept may be in a position to recruit workers and new businesses. Those choosing to work at home are not necessarily retirees, and many professionals may choose this option to avoid the commuting and related costs.

PROTOTYPICAL UNIT

The prototypical home unit would be a twin-home with all facilities and living spaces on the main floor. The office space would be developed adjacent to the main front entrance. This would allow clients and employees to come and go without having to pass through other parts of the home and disrupt the family. A half-bath would be accessible from the office without going through the living unit, a convenience to the professional and clients. Utilities and laundry areas may also be adjacent to the office area, permitting the professional to do some home care activities without interrupting the family activities or special individual needs. Garage space would have access near the office to reduce noise and activity outside

of the work space. Each garage would fit two vehicles and would only be used for parking.

All corridors, doors, master baths, and other family work and living areas would be designed with dimensions meeting accessibility codes, including outside entrances and patios. This would provide an interior design that would meet the needs of aging residents or others with mobility challenges without future interior modifications that would be required in the typical suburban home. Egress to rear patios would be provided from bedrooms and other living areas for convenience and emergency purposes in case the front entrance is blocked. High-quality French doors serve this purpose quite well. The rear patios or decks serve the family's needs for exterior space without conflicting with office activities.

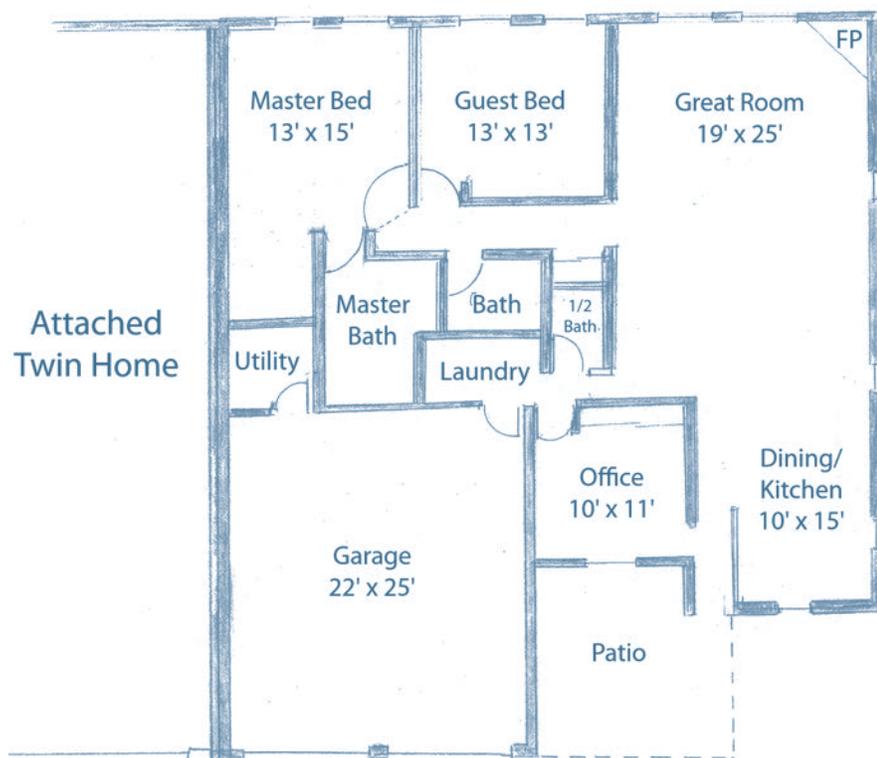
Adequate soundproofing would be required between twin-home units to allow for activities without interfering with the adjacent unit. Examples may include teaching music or creating crafts where high-pitched sounds may be emitted. When garages are placed between the units they serve as a buffer and there is less sound transfer.

A front patio accessible from the office or front entrance would be an added amenity allowing visiting with clients in the outside environment as weather permits. Because a coffee break on the patio can be calming and creative, the office should include a kitchenette for beverage service.

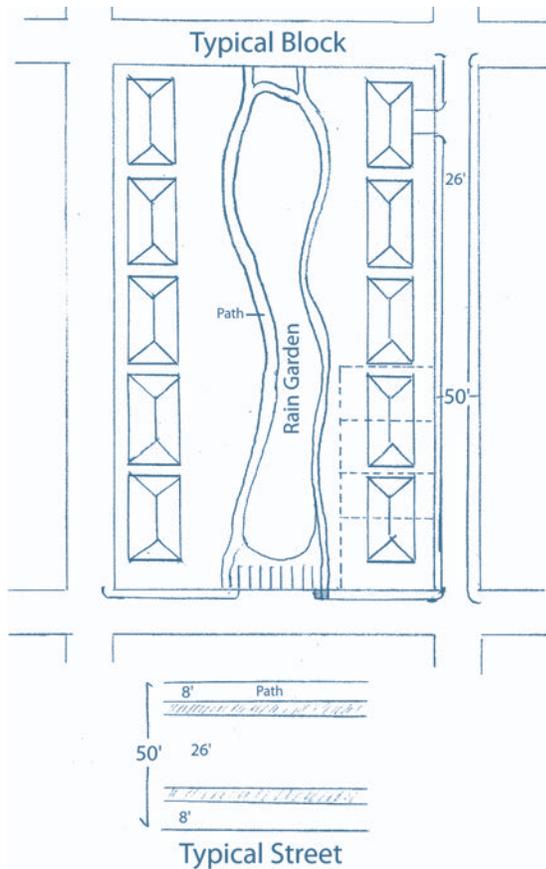
Certain businesses may require communications antennas, which would need to be discretely placed. Examples may include incorporating antennas into fireplace chimney design or landscape features.

The family may have reached the time in life when a live-in caregiver is necessary. This person could be accommodated in a second bedroom with a separate bathroom. Another option would be a walk-out basement, if the site design allows it, or the attached unit could also become the caregiver's housing. If a walk-out basement is used, the enabling zoning ordinance would need to permit accessory dwelling units.

If there is an outside employee or regular clients coming to the home, there may be a need for additional parking, and this should be considered both in the design of the individual unit and the work-at-home village.



➔ Prototypical unit: 1,608 square feet of living space.



➔ A typical block and street section for a work-at-home village.

THE WORK-AT-HOME VILLAGE CONCEPT AND GUIDELINES

The work-at-home village would be compact in design to encourage walking, communication, and social connection. Therefore the total site area should not exceed 100 acres and no arterial streets should divide the village. Streets would be 26 feet curb to curb, and beyond the curb, both sides of each street would be designed for nonmotorized traffic, including pedestrians, scooters, bicycles, and accessibility equipment. These paths should be a minimum of eight feet wide. This way multiple modes of transportation can be safely accommodated within a 50-foot street right-of-way, which is narrower than many conventional suburban residential streets. The paved street simply serves as access to the units and for service and delivery vehicles.

In order to keep the village compact, lot sizes would be limited to the space that the twin home requires with approximately 12 feet

between structures. Setbacks from the pathway would be about 20 feet to allow for parking in driveways, and rear setbacks would be based on the unit depth and patios. The distance from the fronts of units on either side of the street would be about 90 feet instead of the 110 feet typical in many residential subdivisions.

The interior block space would be common and would include rain gardens for stormwater collection and pathways for inter-block communication. Block lengths should be limited to the distance required to accommodate five buildings (10 units) per block or approximately 600 feet. The ends of blocks should not be developed with home units to allow access through the interior of the block for pedestrians and maintenance vehicles. Block ends could also include parking bays for the additional guest parking but not long-term parking for residents or the storage of vehicles. Cul-de-sacs should not be utilized as they disrupt pedestrian flow.

Pedestrian-level lighting would be provided on all streets at not more than 250-foot intervals and at intersections. A recommended maximum height for pedestrian lighting is 12 feet.

A space would be required in the center of the development for a village gathering place for easy access from the dwelling units. This village place would be housed in a single building containing convenience retail, personal services, and shared office space. Outside landscaping could include play equipment and sitting areas in gardens.

The village place would be the primary social connection for the village and could include some programming such as dance, exercise, games, and crafts. The coffee shop and other shared gathering spaces would provide opportunities for exchanging ideas, mentoring, and simply accounting for each other. Groups of professionals may meet in think-tank sessions. Community caring develops through these connections. Day care may be provided

for children and adults. Children or grandchildren of work-at-home professionals would benefit from this day-care connection, and the professional would be relieved of some responsibilities to encourage more efficient and effective work. Adult day care can provide some relief from caregiving and also keeps those adults socially connected. Work-at-home professionals may want to meet with clients at the center or hold small group meetings. Meeting space would include amenities such as interactive whiteboards, projectors, and wired or wireless connections for web-based conferences.

The success of this development concept would likely require some additional guidelines or rules. These may include building design guidelines, rules for parking, limits on excessive outdoor activity bothersome to neighbors (e.g., auto repair in driveways), and provisions for refuse and recycling storage and collection (e.g., a common collection service). These additional guidelines or rules may be enshrined in a development agreement or in private covenants, conditions, and restrictions imposed by an owners association.

ZONING FOR THE WORK-AT-HOME VILLAGE

Local jurisdictions may face some challenges if a work-at-home village is proposed. City councils and planning commissions may not be comfortable with new concepts. The approach of mixing commercial with residential in the work-at-home village would need to be presented with a comparison to familiar development concepts, such as a golf course community, and must include development standards. The narrower street design and right-of-way may require amendments to regulatory ordinances. Plans would need to clearly demonstrate that this is a complete development concept and not simply a way of mixing land uses through flexible zoning.

The work-at-home village would not be permitted as-of-right in most Euclidean zoning ordinances. Because this development concept is contingent on specific site and building design features and would include some commercial activities, it is, perhaps, best accommodated through the creation of a new planned development district. Suggested model standards are provided below. The work-at-home village is not simply a series of home occupations but is a lifestyle that may

be chosen by those wanting to continue their careers in a village setting of like-minded individuals and families. The work-at-home village concept does not replace the traditional zoning ordinance regulations for home occupations or other accessory uses in residential districts. Some uses that creep into single-family districts, such as cabinet shops and small engine repair, would not be permitted in work-at-home villages. The business part of the home in a work-at-home village would not be considered as an accessory use but would be a limited portion of the home, and the combination of the business and the home are the principal use within the development.

CONCLUSIONS

Many professional service firms and government agencies are downsizing office space due to a number of factors, including the increased practicality of telecommuting, staff reductions through retirement or attrition, and outsourcing. Meanwhile, many metropolitan areas are seeing increasing commuting times, both as a result of more traffic and extended suburban and exurban development. The work-at-home village concept would provide an opportu-

nity for developers and local jurisdictions to embrace these changes, which may become the new normal for the workplace. Potential challenges to work-at-home development may include regulatory barriers, inexperience within the development community for taking on new concepts, and resistance from the financial institutions.

Cities and counties that acknowledge and embrace this new work-at-home village lifestyle in their comprehensive plans and development regulations would have a better opportunity to retain senior brain power and recruit seniors and freelance professionals for brain gain. Having the work-at-home lifestyle available may also help communities to recruit new businesses and industries, which would also help to balance the age groupings within the community, retain quality schools, and provide shopping and community amenities.

ZONING MODEL ORDINANCE

Division X. Work-at-Home Village District

Sec. 1-1. Purpose.

It is the purpose of the Work-at-Home Village District to permit the establishment of work-at-home residential living units along with a village place that includes

some diversified commercial activities specific to serving a planned residential development.

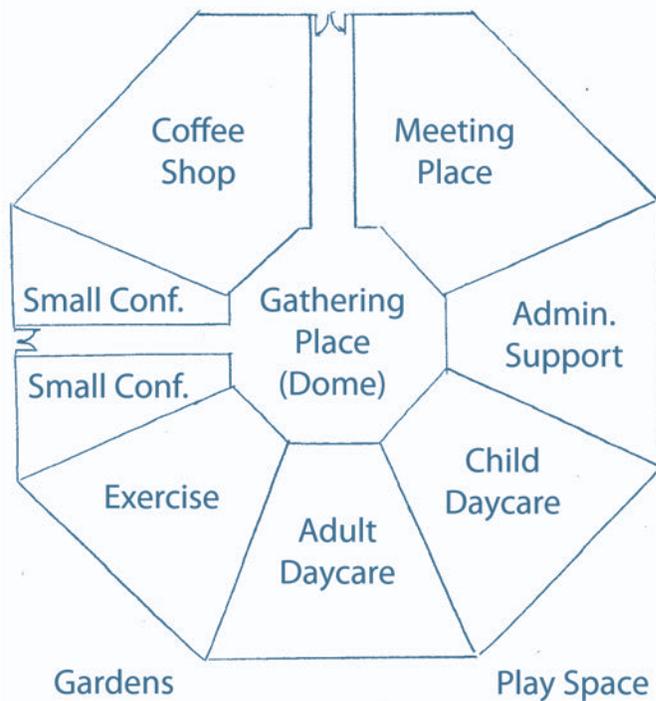
Sec. 1-2. Definition.

Work-at-Home Dwelling units are those designed specifically to include offices and work areas where the dwelling occupant may carry on business activities on a full time basis. The dwelling and work area are together the principle land use.

Sec. 1-3. Procedure.

The development of a work-at-home village is a planned process, and the zoning district shall be established in conjunction with the subdivision and planned development zoning district process. The following procedure shall be followed:

- a. The proposed developer shall prepare preliminary sketch plans for the work-at-home village. Plans shall include:
 1. A proposed general layout for the development, including streets, utilities, storm drainage, typical block development, living unit examples, location and services of the village place, non-motorized vehicle and pedestrian circulation, lighting, and landscaping.
 2. A written description of the proposal including development timing, general narrative of the concept, development of the village center, and financing methods.
- b. The Planning Commission shall review the sketch plan for site development, unit type, village center, and proposed development and maintenance regulations. After the review the Commission may give preliminary concept approval, or may require additional information. The Commission shall state the type of information required.
- c. Upon Planning Commission approval of the preliminary concept, the developer may proceed to develop detailed plans.
- d. The detailed plans shall be reviewed by the Planning Commission and it shall give approval or reject the detailed plans. If the detailed plans are not approved, the Commission shall make specific recommendations that will result in an acceptable plan approval. A time schedule shall be established for continuing review.
- e. Upon receipt of acceptable plans, the Planning Commission shall hold a public hearing on the detailed plans.
- f. After the public hearing the Planning Commission shall make a recommendation to the City Council including any plan adjustments resulting from the public hearing.



➔ Work-at-home village place.

- g. The City Council shall adopt the plan by ordinance as a Zoning Map amendment, or may request the developer to make plan adjustments and set a time schedule for additional City Council review and action.
- h. Upon approval by the City Council, the Council and developer shall enter into a development agreement subject to the detailed plans.

Sec. 1-4. Business limitations.

The business activity within the work-at-home unit shall not exceed 15 percent of the gross floor area of the dwelling, or more than 300 square feet, whichever is greater. Garage space shall not be used for business purposes or for calculating gross floor area for business purposes. General business development may not occur outside of the village center.

Sec. 1-5. Permitted uses.

- a. Work-at-home dwellings.
- b. Village place, including conference space, mail and shipping services, staff support services, convenience foods, coffee shop and gathering space, and day care centers.

Sec. 1-6. Signs and lighting.

- a. Work-at-home dwellings may have a three-square-foot sign mounted on the face of the structure. These signs may not be lighted other than by normal exterior home lighting.
- b. The village place may have signs up to 150 square feet of sign area per building face. Signs shall be placed on the building, and lighting shall be indirect. Interior lighting shall not be permitted. Signs are not permitted on canopies, and canopies shall not be lighted except as provided for pedestrian movement. Freestanding signs are not permitted.
- c. All lighting shall be at the pedestrian level and shall not exceed 12 feet in height.

Sec. 1-7. Accessory uses and structures.

- a. Accessory dwellings may be permitted within the primary structure, such as in a walk-out basement. Accessory dwellings shall not include work-at-home spaces. Accessory dwellings shall include a separate entrance, secondary egress, kitchen, bath, living area, bedroom, laundry, and utilities.
- b. Accessory uses and structures outside of the primary structure are prohibited, including storage buildings of any size.

Sec. 1-6. Parking.

Parking for work-at-home dwellings shall include two garage spaces and two spaces in front of the garage

available to guests and clients. Garages shall be accessible to vehicles at all times. Parking for the village center shall be based on the need. Parking clusters may also be designed at the block ends for additional guest and client parking.

Sec. 1-8. Dimensions.

Lot dimensions shall be based on the subdivision and unit design subject to the development standards for work-at-home communities.

Sec. 1-9. Village development guidelines.

- a. A subdivision shall be prepared in accordance with the approved Planned Development District. The subdivision shall include street rights-of-way, a storm drainage system, a utility system for sanitary sewer, and potable water, gas, electric, and communications systems.
- b. A site dedicated for the village place.
- c. Existing and proposed development surrounding the village.
- d. Access and egress intersections with the arterial street system.
- e. Design of streets, pathways, inter-block rain gardens and pathways.
 - 1. Streets shall be paved a width of 26 feet curb to curb.
 - 2. Pathways within the street right-of-way shall be a minimum of 8 feet in width.
 - 3. Inter-block rain gardens shall be adequate in size and depth to contain the normal runoff from each individual block as well as storm flooding.
 - 4. The ends of blocks shall not be developed with housing units and shall be left open for access/egress into the block for maintenance and pedestrian circulation. Parking bays may be located at the block ends.
 - 5. A lot shall be designated for each dwelling unit. The lot size shall be the minimum required to fit the work-at-home unit including driveway, patios, and decks.
 - 6. Exterior grounds throughout the village shall be maintained through a common service and shall be accessible to residents.
- f. Village place
 - 1. A village place shall be developed central to the subdivision and be available at the time the first group of homes are constructed and sold.
 - 2. Minimum improvements in the village place shall include a coffee shop, meeting space, a gathering space, room for administrative services and daycare, and outside spaces for play equipment and garden seating.

- 3. The design of the village place shall be consistent with the overall design concept for the work-at-home dwellings. Industrial type metal finishes shall not be permitted.

g. Work-at-home units

- 1. Work-at-home dwellings within the village shall have various designs meeting the basic work-at-home dwelling concept.
- 2. The design of the various units shall be architecturally compatible with other dwelling designs and with the village center. Industrial type metal finishes shall not be permitted.
- 3. A front patio shall be provided for each unit and rear patios or decks shall be provided with access/egress from bedrooms and living areas.

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IS YOUR COMMUNITY READY
FOR THE WORK-AT-HOME VILLAGE?

