



William Decker (left) stands on the Deer Run nature trail, a strip of land he preserved for the condominium community. A sign (above) at the trail's entrance reminds visitors to protect the environment.

Photos by Dennis Oblander

Developer works to preserve land in Bedford

By Matt Milkovich
Staff Writer

BEDFORD TWP. — William Decker walked along the nature trail, pointing out some of his favorite features.

"We dug a little marsh pond over here," he said, looking ahead. "Two days later frogs were croaking in it. We were like, 'Where did the frogs come from?'"

He pointed out some of the other attributes of the nature area, located behind Deer Run, a condominium community built by his development company. He was clearly proud of what he had accomplished.

"We brought in 75 fir

trees when we built seven years ago," he said. "They're not native to this piece of land. Every one of them was transplanted."

The Deer Run nature area includes a strip of wetlands next to a small ravine, native plants and a wooden nature trail, all behind the condominiums.

"I had a jewel in the rough here," Decker said. "The wetlands area is the focal point of this community."

Decker, 64, has co-owned Decker Homes with his wife, Elizabeth, since 1981. His company has built seven neighborhoods in the township. All of his devel-

opments have conservation areas, he said.

"When we build we try to set aside a small portion of the development for a conservation area," he said. "It's very attractive to people living there."

Decker started as an energy-efficient builder, and believes that conservation and energy efficiency go hand in hand. Even though he's a developer, he cares about the environment, he said.

"I know land," Decker said. "I look at a piece of land as an artist would. We paint the whole picture."

A recent example of his conservation efforts is

Deerfield Woods, a neighborhood near Whiteford Township. Ten percent of the development, four acres out of 40, was set aside for a conservation area, he said.

The four-acre parcel is a strip of trees behind a few of the homes. Technically, homeowners own the part of the strip that's behind their houses, but can't do anything with it because of a deed restriction, Decker said.

Setting the land aside didn't cost Decker anything. He simply raised the price of the lots in front of the conservation area. People are willing to pay more for wooded lots, he said.

"People might see me as benevolent, but this is just good business," he said. "In most cases, conserving some land won't cost you anything."

Carolyn Tiettmeyer lives on one of the wooded lots, and is glad there is a strip of trees to buffer her home from any encroaching developments.

"We bought this house because of the wood strip," she said. "Our last house had woods behind it, and we were told it wouldn't be developed, but it was."

Tiettmeyer wasn't thrilled about paying more for the wooded lot, but she was

willing to do it, she said.

"There are houses on the other side, but the strip of trees is a big, big buffer. It looks like nobody could ever build back there."

The wooded strip contains only a tenth of the trees that originally stood on the property before it was developed. Decker regrets having to cut down the majority of the trees, but if he didn't do it, another developer with less respect for the land would have, he said.

It would be ideal if the surrounding community could buy the land and preserve it, but local governments aren't usually willing to do that. If the land is for sale, it's probably going to be developed, Decker said.

"We saved what we could," he said. "At least we made Deerfield Woods into a beautiful community."

Decker Homes has built more than 500 houses, most of them in the Lambertville area, where Decker lives. His next project will be a 50-acre piece of land he bought in Ida Township, he said.

"This land deserves somebody that has a passion for it, and that's me," he said. "I'd rather see it conserved, but that won't happen."

Decker said he would build no more than five houses on the property, and would protect some of the older trees, which are more than 100 years old, he said.

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Developing conservation

Home builder contributes to land conservancy

By Matt Milkovich
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BEDFORD TWP. — William Decker is a walking contradiction: a developer who donates money to a group that fights to preserve land.

Decker, 64, is the owner of Decker Homes, a development and construction company that has built several neighborhoods in Bedford Township, in the process clearing a lot of land and cutting down a lot of trees.

He's also the Monroe County Land Conservancy's largest contributor, a group dedicated

to preserving natural areas, farmland and open space in the county.

Even before he joined the land conservancy, Decker was concerned with conservation and energy efficiency. To him, conservation and development don't have to be mutually exclusive notions.

"Builders are always thought of as rapists," he said. "But I've read of other developers doing what I'm doing. I'm not the Lone Ranger."

In fact, Decker said, mixing conservation with development is good busi-

ness.

"It doesn't have to be developers versus conservationists," land conservancy President Pat Schoen said. "The two groups should be working hand in hand. When communities have open space and parks, property values are higher. It should be looked at as a win-win situation."

The Monroe County Land Conservancy is a branch of the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy. It started in 1998 and has about 100 members. Decker is the only developer in the group, Schoen said.

Decker joined the conservancy in its early days. He got some dirty looks at his first meeting, he said.

"Most of them looked at me like I was the bad guy," he said. "I stopped going to meetings after a while. I thought I was doing more harm to the group than positive."

Since the awkward start, conservancy members seem to have changed their minds about Decker. They named him a land patron in 1999, an award given to contributors who give \$1,000 or more in a year.

He regularly donates \$500 to \$1,000 a year, and

once donated a \$4,000 copy machine to the conservancy, Schoen said.

However, Decker still doesn't go to meetings.

"If I went today, I'd probably be welcome, but I don't like night meetings," he said with a smile. "I'm getting old. When I'm home for the day, I like to stay there."

Even when he first joined, Decker was too busy to do much more than contribute money.

"I didn't want to pull weeds, I wanted to give financial support," he said. "That's where I fit in. They

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need volunteers and people like me to support them financially."

Without Decker's financial support, the conservancy would be struggling to survive, Schoen said.

"Most of our efforts so far have been educational," he said. "We teach landowners how they can protect their land. We're still looking to purchase our first piece of land."

The land conservancy has had no influence on Decker's decisions as a

developer, and he doesn't actively try to persuade other developers to see things his way, he said.

"I can't make a judgment on other developers," he said. "I don't know what everybody else is doing."

Schoen doesn't consider developers to be villains.

"They're making a living," he said. "If there is a demand for housing, there is a demand for developers. We're not totally against developers, we're against bad development."