

remodel: from warehouse to wow

santa fean

October/November 2008

The Home Issue

21st century
Santa Fe style

at home with
Patricia Carlisle
and David Pearson

how homebuilding
is protecting an
ecological hot spot

plus: *Hispanic dance heats up the season*
Artists speak about the power of home

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Display until November 29, 2008

\$4.95





PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON SILVERMAN

uncommon

By Jason Silverman

GROUND

The Santa Fe-based nonprofit Commonweal Conservancy is preserving what may be the most ecologically sensitive spot in New Mexico in the most unlikely of ways: by building houses on it. Here's how its one-of-a-kind Galisteo Basin development project is changing the way we think about conservation.

Upon first glance, the Galisteo Basin looks like much of New Mexico's millions of acres of rangeland. Scrubby piñon pocks the red-earth hills, and tufts of grass sporadically color the wide, open plain. Yet where some might see only scrub brush, Ted Harrison, of the conservation-based community-development group Commonwealth Conservancy, visualizes an enviro-mecca.

The organization's communications director, Lauren Whitehurst, can easily explain his vision: home sites tucked into the contours of the land to preserve public vistas. Some 50 miles of horseback, biking, and hiking trails winding through more than 12,000 acres of public open space. Views of four mountain ranges. An orchard of heirloom apples and plums. Shops, cafés, studios, and a school within walking distance from your front door. Minimal roads and culverts, designed to reduce impact on the natural landscape and encourage the return of native flora and wildlife, after a century of damage from large-scale grazing. Maybe even, someday, a commuter train to drop you off in the heart of Santa Fe. That's what Whitehurst and her colleagues at Commonwealth are sketching out for the Galisteo Basin Preserve (GBP), a former ranch located a dozen scenic miles south of Santa Fe that they're turning into a first-of-its-kind community.

Even without the cute animated critters, it sounds like Disneyland for progressive, green-minded home buyers—including, possibly, Whitehurst herself. For the mother of a toddler, outdoors enthusiast and avid weekend hiker, the idea seems to fit her lifestyle as naturally as the contoured roads she envisions will fit the land. Sales are showing she's not alone. The lots at three of Commonwealth's four developments are nearly sold out, and Whitehurst suspects property at the fourth—the village—will sell briskly once available. Across the country, too, similar patterns in new green developments offer evidence that the market for eco-friendly homes is exploding, even as overall home sales stagnate. And with this project standing as only one among several

Left and below: Two views of Cerro Pelon from Galisteo Basin Preserve. More than 90 percent of the preserve's 12,000 protected acres will be open to public use. Bottom: The home of Fred and J.J. Milder, an off-the-grid 5,000-square-foot complex, includes a swimming pool heated with both active and passive solar systems and kept covered to nearly eliminate water waste.

ESSEL BRECKNER, COURTESY COMMONWEALTH



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that have embraced eco-principles (the Railyard development and Oshara Village among the most prominent) in a city that is considering enacting some of the country's most progressive green-building codes, people nationwide are beginning to look to the City Different for enviro-friendly solutions to building problems. That includes Fred and J.J. Milder, formerly of Boston, who bought one of the 125-acre ranchettes at GBP and built the first of two homes so far completed—a 5,000-square-foot complex that's completely off the grid. For Commonweal, the timing couldn't have been better. The group has already invested more than five years of planning into the groundbreaking project, which will feature, in addition to three conservation neighborhood developments, a fully functional, walkable village (currently in the permitting process): a tight weave of 900-plus green, mixed-income houses plus civic and commercial spaces.

With this everything-in-its-eco-place concept, Whitehurst says GBP provides a productive alternative to the "private club" practice of resort-area development. To create this alternative, Commonweal identified building sites using high-tech mapping tools, evaluating the Galisteo Basin property in more than 20 categories that take into account wildlife, ecology, hydrology, scenic values, and the area's rich archeological history. In order to preserve those features, all structures will be built where Commonweal has determined is best for the community and the land. Infrastructure, too, will be green. The organization has consulted with engineers on the creation of roads to encourage water flow that will support local flora and, hopefully, revitalize the land, and also plans to install community-level renewable-energy systems that will minimize dependence on traditional sources. Taking the mission beyond building patterns—and far into the future—is a complementary plan through which residents of the preserve and surrounding communities will become the active stewards of its long-term health. So when the project is finished, roughly 12,000 acres of protected, publicly accessible open space—more than 90 percent of the preserve—will be allowed to heal and regrow.

At least, that's the concept. No community-oriented, eco-friendly, tech-savvy real estate development project like this, as far as Whitehurst knows, has ever been attempted before—or none that takes these combined tenets so far, on such a large scale. Loretto Bay Company in Baja California, Mexico, for instance, is relying on many of the same design principles in its development but has set aside only about 50 percent of its lands—still an impressive amount—for conservation. Other eco-developments in places ranging from Livingston, Montana, to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, are likewise setting aside less land than Commonweal, or restricting access. But despite having few or no role models, the Galisteo Basin project seems to be in good hands. Commonweal's founder, local planner/environmentalist Ted Harrison, has assembled a brain trust that includes for-profit entities (banks, private investors, and real estate companies), nonprofit organizations (including Earth Works Institute, Santa Fe Conservation Trust and WildEarth Guardians), and consultants, engineers, designers, and architects from eight states to collectively turn his vision into reality.

THE CONCEPT FOR COMMONWEAL and for the Galisteo Basin project came to Harrison in 2001 while he was working at the Trust for Public Land, after he and his colleagues brokered a deal to protect lands around Petroglyph Hill, a 1,500-acre slice of high desert within the Galisteo Basin's sprawling Thornton Ranch Southwest of Santa Fe. Of course, there was reason to celebrate: After years of work, one of the region's most ecologically and culturally sensitive properties had been declared off limits to real estate developers.

Below: a home created by EcoNest, a Tesuque-based green architecture/building company currently designing Jonathan Franzer's Galisteo Basin home. Right: an early rendering of the Village development's projected appearance upon completion. Inset map: the Galisteo Basin Preserve, showing clustered developments that leave large swaths of contiguous public open space.





ILLUSTRATION BY COMMONWEALTH

Harrison, strangely, hadn't felt like hoisting the victory flag. True, 1,500 acres were safe. But what about the other 17,000 acres surrounding it, still on the way to market?

Harrison, a lanky man with a gentle demeanor and a tendency to stand rather than sit, speaks with enthusiasm about all aspects of the project, drawing from a range of references that reveal the depth of his interest in the ideas that undergird it. He recalls recognizing that current trends pointed toward high-end, highly destructive development for most of the Galisteo Basin: ridgetop faux-dobe mansions, each with its own fence, security gate, and steep, snaking driveway; roads built without concern for wildlife or hydrology; maybe a golf course. Private concerns, in other words, would once again supersede public ones. When, upon deeper reflection, a win like that began looking like a loss, he decided it might be time to change the rules of the game. "I felt driven to explore different models of development and to test some ideas of community making with as small an ecological footprint as we could imagine," he says.

That's why, in August 2003, Commonwealth was born—and why Harrison considers the Galisteo Basin project to be just the first of many development/conservation undertakings to take place in New Mexico and beyond. He bases this on the conviction that the power of the real estate market, combined with a growing consciousness of our environmental crisis, offers an opportunity to protect as much land as possible in a new way. Harrison believes projects like GBP can serve as models of cooperation between people and their ecosystems. "Part of our problem," he asserts, "is that we view natural areas as outside of the human and social realms—places we go away to visit—as opposed to something integral to our daily lives."

Without Commonwealth's efforts, Harrison says, the Thornton Ranch would have turned into a business-as-usual development, comprising hundreds of ranchettes (each with its own well), an estimated 70 miles of roads, and what Commonwealth's literature describes as "incalculable habitat loss,

BY THE NUMBERS

Galisteo Basin Preserve (inset map)

total acres	13,000
conservation acres	12,000
acres to be developed	< 650
miles of trails, including adjacent public lands	> 50
total homesites	1,013
homes completed so far	2

The Village (rendering)

acres	300
percent of planned homes within ¼ mile of trails	100
total homesites	965
market-rate units	675
affordable units	290
commercial/civic square feet	150,000
projected annual water use, in acre-feet per house	0.16
annual water use in Eldorado, in acre-feet per house	0.20



KEVIN OTTENREIL, COURTESY CLEMSON/REDAUX

TAKING THE LEED

Who says you can't have your eco-home and live in it too? That's what Fred and J.J. Milder wondered in 2005, when they purchased a 125-acre ranchette in the Galisteo Basin Preserve and broke ground on the project's first house. The Boston transplants wanted to be completely off the grid but weren't willing to give up the comforts of what Fred calls "completely modern living, no compromises." That meant building a 5,000-square-foot hacienda-style complex powered entirely by photovoltaic arrays and boasting a three-building design that requires "an interaction with the outside at all times of the year." If the couple's all-natural, \$1.5-million residence (completed last fall) is any indication of the direction other GBP homes will take, the project may owe as much to Santa Fe's creative legacy as it does to the idea of an earth-friendly future.—MS



PHOTOGRAPH BY GREGORY JOHNSON/ENR

widespread soil erosion, and a host of other negative environmental and social outcomes.” A conventional development pattern would include crisscrossing roads and driveways, with houses dotting every bit of territory: suburban sprawl. A map of Commonwealth’s plan, on the other hand, looks like an open space, with a few dense areas where all of the development is concentrated and less than half as many miles of roads—more like the map of a national park. As for water use, Commonwealth’s projections for Phase I of the village development includes two wells as opposed to about 200, with groundwater comprising only a portion of water sources, in addition to community-scale gray-water recycling and rainwater catchment infrastructure. “That’s a lot fewer holes punched into the aquifer,” Whitehurst says.

Accomplishing its mammoth goals has not been simple, however, and the process continues to be fraught with challenges. The land itself is being purchased in pieces over a six-year period between 2005 and 2011, to give Commonwealth time to pull together funds from an array of loans, donations, foundation grants, private investments, and property sales. Coordinating the dizzying number of entities involved is itself a daunting task; then there’s the need to acquire permits and approvals, and broker agreements among state and county officials, members of surrounding communities, and partner organizations—especially since, at first blush, combining real estate development with environmental protection seems oxymoronic. How can environmentalists put up houses somewhere beautiful, pristine, and delicate? Yet that’s exactly the mind-set Harrison wants to confront. “Most environmental organizations take a defensive stance,” he points out. “The main concern is to preserve spaces, to set them aside, away from any development risk. There is a lot of value in that work, but I grew concerned and frustrated that that practice was an exercise in museum-piece creation for future generations. It didn’t pursue as actively as I wished my desire to integrate communities within these landscapes, and to cultivate communities that can serve as stewards of these lands.”

HAVING SPENT THE PAST FIVE YEARS ANALYZING how best to build on the old Thornton Ranch—and how best to approach conscious development in general—Commonwealth and its partners have made some revelatory discoveries about the ecosystem’s history. The entire Galisteo Basin, a 730-square-mile area that encompasses land between Glorieta Baldy, Ortiz Mountain, Santo Domingo Pueblo, and the southern end of the Sangre de Cristo range, contains four different eco-regions, making it, according to Earthworks Institute’s Jan-Willem Jansens, the most ecologically diverse spot in New Mexico. Galisteo Basin Preserve is at geographic center—part of a continental wildlife corridor that stretches from Alaska to the American Southeast. “We can’t restore all of what was there,” says Jansens, a key consultant to Commonwealth, “but we can better understand what’s most valuable for restoration.”

Clockwise from top left: The Milder home’s central courtyard, with the Ortiz Mountains beyond; Cerro Pelon and the Ortiz Mountains as seen from GBP; the Milder home’s ornate entry gate and hacienda-style portal; the portal framing a view to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains; the Milder kitchen.

Commonwealth has made some revelatory discoveries about the ecosystem. The entire Galisteo Basin contains four eco-regions, making it the most ecologically diverse spot in New Mexico.

According to historian Bill Baxter, the land has played stage to a long history of human habitation. Between 1300 and 1450 A.D. or so, the basin hosted Pueblo cities that together were home to as many as 4,000 people. The land remains dense with archaeological sites. And after those populations moved away—probably having done enough damage to the ecosystem to make sustenance untenable—new settlers brought in livestock, causing still more damage. By the turn of the 20th century, Baxter estimates as many as a million sheep were roaming, and chewing up, the landscape. With the vegetation disappearing, the arroyos couldn't hold their water, and the delicate land baked. Still, to Baxter, the basin seems nearly sacred. Although he prefers Commonweal's light footprint to the more invasive development that has been threatening the area for years, still better, he argues, would be federal designation as a National Historic Monument.

Baxter's wish will not come true. Arrow points and pronghorn antelope notwithstanding, development in southern Santa Fe County rolls on, with all sorts of unforeseen, or at least unpublicized, consequences. For example, sprawling developments nearby might have already dropped the water table. Still more threatening: After oil reserves were discovered under the Galisteo Basin, Houston-based Tecton Energy announced plans in 2007 to drill on land it had leased. Environmental and community activists, using their full deployment of bumper stickers and letters to the editors, caught the attention of officials, who have since stalled the sweet-crude extraction efforts, at least temporarily.

Still, homes will continue to be built in the areas surrounding Santa Fe. And if we have to build, says David Cartwright, a real estate investor who has bet significant chits on Commonweal's success, we may as well build smart. "[The Galisteo Basin project] addresses a fundamental compromise in our society between those advocating no development at all and those who have no regard for the consequences of intensive development," he says. "The former position has wonderful philosophical purity, and is attractive to the very wealthiest segment of the population—but it has no regard for the practical requirements of American life. People have to have someplace to live. And they can either do it in conformity with practices that often ignore cultural, ecological, societal, and design problems and deficiencies—or they can do it thinking about limiting the overall impact, with a very high regard for quality of life."

A self-described conservative, Cartwright is among a growing number of investors who believe the American system of urban and home design is badly

broken. What's wrong with the way we build our houses and cities, he believes, is that it encourages destructive cultural beliefs: that privacy and isolation are measures of success, that owning multiple cars is a good thing, and that the suburban life is a healthy aspiration. "It might seem self-evident that we are living the way we want to live—with our residences spread out to the horizon line, moving into the center for work and shopping," he says. "That seems natural to us—that 'naturally' people want as much privacy and space as they can have. But that's a very strange view of what makes a good society: It's hugely consumptive of land and resources. The fact is that this settlement pattern is not natural and not necessarily good for individuals or society."

To that end, Harrison can cite a variety of studies suggesting that the way we build our houses has deep health impacts. "If there's nowhere to walk or ride a bike, your house oozes toxins, power is piped in from the next state over, exhaust fills the air, and you check in with nature one Sunday a month—well, both you and the environment sustaining you will grow increasingly unhealthy." The GBP is designed to be the antithesis of our current system: walkable, sociable, interactive, stay-at-home, diverse—in Harrison's word, "yeasty." A little yeastiness, it turns out, is enough to attract attention from some big national organizations. The U. S. Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) program, the standard for evaluating green buildings, has included Commonweal in its new Neighborhood Development Pilot Program, which aims to create a system for rating entire communities rather than just individual homes. To top it off, the village is one of a handful of international projects being celebrated in *Green Community*, an exhibition opening this month at the National Building Museum, in Washington, D.C.—high praise for a project that's not yet broken ground.

COMMONWEAL ACKNOWLEDGES the Galisteo Basin Preserve is not perfectly green. As Whitehurst points out, "All development is inherently destructive." Many residents will additionally need to make the drive from their eco-homes to downtown Santa Fe, 32 miles roundtrip, on a daily basis. Commonweal plans to minimize this, however, with community van pooling, rapid bus service, a possible commuter rail, and the eventual addition of schools, meeting spaces, and small businesses within the village.

Despite compromises, the consciousness with which the project was designed—and its commitment to "low-impact design approaches"—remains

greatly appealing to would-be-green homeowners. Among these is Jonathan Frenzen, who teaches business at the University of Chicago and hopes to build at the project's New Moon Overlook development site this fall. (His house is being designed by EcoNest, a Tesuque-based green-architecture and building company.) "Buckminster Fuller said pollution is nothing but the resources we are not harvesting," he says. "Prudent development embodies good economics. Both can lead to better quality of life. In a future that will be characterized by rising prices for strained natural resources, the Galisteo Basin project defines a path that surrounding communities should follow." It is what he calls "a no-brainer."

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Part of the trick to making eco-building work, Harrison acknowledges, is making it profitable. Cartwright agrees. "People now are willing to pay for the positive actual and psychic benefits," he says. "I expect [GBP] to yield an economic premium to an early investor. The intangibles are just so extraordinary I am definitely profit-motivated, and would not invest but for the long-term upside." For this project, that means decades. Only two homes have been completed so far, with just a handful currently in process. Meanwhile, construction of the village, occurring in five phases, is projected to last until around 2021. "We'll have to wait to judge the project for five, 10, 20 years," says Harrison—enough time for material choices to translate into communal-lifestyle patterns. "It will be successful," he says thoughtfully, "if we create a community people love; if it represents the things they love about New Mexico, if it affirms their values; if people find comfort and satisfaction in calling this place their home; if this can evolve into a stewardship community, with everyone giving back to the land that surrounds them. And if it can be inspirational for the real estate industry—to provide a different model for community making—that would be of benefit to us all." ■