

Smart Growth 101

Sunday, December 17, 2006

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Put a civil engineer, a landscape architect, a marine biologist and a Realtor together and they will all agree -- Water Runs Down Hill.

That's the name of the popular real estate and development course on smart growth. And the "four musketeers" behind it are:

George Crozier, director of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, who proudly wears the black hat to class, and can rattle off the good, the bad and the ugly developments.

Civil engineer professor Kevin White, chair of the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of South Alabama, and landscape architect Terry Plauche don the white hats and offer ways to plan and lay out a project while maintaining the quality of the land. Plauche serves as chairman of the Mobile Planning Commission.

Realtor Emily Sommer shows that most buyers want the trees, sidewalks and natural terrain that the course advocates and that help sell properties.

The group teaches the continuing education course via the nonprofit Grassroots Inc., and received a \$10,000 federal grant to put the course in online form, and it will soon be available statewide and in 44 other states early next year.

The Environmental Protection Agency grant also paid for a six-hour course for local engineers and a bus trip for students to see the cost-effective ways to preserve land while developing it, said Sommer of Roberts Brothers.

"We're not against development. We recognize the economic impact of development, but we can't foul our own nest," she said.

The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program applied for the EPA education grant specifically for Grassroots, according to Roberta Swann, deputy director of the local NEP office.

"Realtors don't typically get educated on how to handle stormwater or wastewater, they tend to focus on the house," Swann said. "That's what's so important about what Grassroots is doing. They are teaching them ways to develop the site in a more environmentally sensitive way and how that can actually be a selling point and add value to the property."

To go online "is a tremendous compliment," said Jeff Newman, executive director of the Mobile Area Association of Realtors. "Very few courses around the country have made it to that standard."

"They've got a good group of true professionals who are in different, but closely related fields and they tie it all together. They make it fun."

Newman, Crozier and Sommer helped start Grassroots Inc. 10 years ago to educate Realtors and developers on land use issues, according to Sommer.

he basic premise of the online course is that "no matter what you do, water goes downhill," Sommer said. "When the land is left in its natural state, the vegetation and the natural slope of the land slow down the water flow and the water is absorbed into the ground.

"But when the vegetation is bulldozed and paved and we create impervious surfaces like driveways, it alters the flow. Suddenly it's flooding or eroding where it's never done it before."

"We have to minimize what we do to the environment or it will cost us more down the road," Crozier said.

Such measures don't have to be expensive either, according to White. "The engineer and the landscape architect can work together to show how the site will look and how it will function."

The course's video also shows how poor planning can affect the quality of life of a homeowner or land owner, according to Crozier.

"We show how some homeowners have lost waterfront accessibility because the runoff has put too much sand into the water," he said. In some cases, an owner can't get his boat up to the dock anymore because the water is too shallow after being filled up with sand and dirt.

The course has been successful in showing developers that a site doesn't have to be cleared and flat to be usable, according to Plauche.

"I know one guy who is a builder who for years had been knocking down everything on the site," Plauche said. "Now he's the biggest tree hugger of all."