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## Anti-Sprawl Tactic Mulled

### Avon Considers Shifting Development From Edges To The Center

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AVON -- Avon could become the first Connecticut town to adopt a novel, anti-sprawl approach that lets developers acquire rights to build more housing near the village center in exchange for paying landowners in out-of-the-way sections to keep their property undeveloped.

The town planning and zoning commission is considering a change in its zoning rules that would allow for such programs.

"We're really looking at it as: Is this a way to channel smart growth, rather than just the standard planning regulations, by preserving some open space and increasing some [multi-family housing] density in areas that can handle it?" said Duane Starr, commission chairman.

State law allows towns to adopt transfer of development rights, or TDR, programs but no town has done so yet, according to Avon's town planner, Steve Kushner.

Towns, counties or regional commissions in several other states, including Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, New Jersey and Colorado, have been running the programs for several years.

"TDR programs are not for the faint of heart, in that they require municipalities to make some proactive decisions about conservation and about development," said Robert Pirani, director of environmental programs at the Regional Plan Association, a nonprofit planning organization in the Connecticut, New York and New Jersey metropolitan area.

But for towns that take on the challenge, he said, there are rewards: money for conservation and development in the right places.

"I think it's exciting that Avon's taken the lead in thinking about this," Pirani said. "I think many Connecticut towns have the planning sophistication and the need to think about conservation and development in this way."

No one is talking about making a change that would bring large-scale housing developments to Avon center, the area near the town green and the intersection of routes 10 and 44.

Housing developments under the voluntary program would still be modest, in keeping with the scale and character of the center.

By the same token, the acreage that would be preserved as open space would also be modest, according to Kushner.

But even small gains in preserving open space would be a benefit, he said.

At the state level, Connecticut has a program to purchase development rights to keep farms from

being developed. Farm owners receive money for the value of their land.

Under transfer of development rights programs, towns can channel growth into suitable areas - where roads, utilities, sewers and commercial buildings already exist - and can preserve other areas such as farms, drinking-water aquifers, wetlands, ridges, river valleys and open space.

Rather than simply adopting rules to control or restrict development, towns can adopt the transfer rules to encourage open space preservation and smart growth through economic incentives, advocates say.

Developers who buy the development rights in an area targeted for preservation receive a density bonus in another area.

In Avon, the easy part is deciding where to encourage open space preservation, Starr said. The planning and zoning commission is considering adopting a program that would focus on three areas for preservation: two large agricultural properties along West Avon Road and the area near Avon Old Farms School on Old Farms Road, he said.

"The more difficult part is, where would we be willing to allow more density?" Starr said.

So far, the proposal is focusing on the so-called village area or Avon center.

"We've got some built-in infrastructure, utilities, bus routes and we might be able to put in smaller multi-family development in there," he said.

"We don't have the unanimous decision among the commissioners yet. So it's not going to happen overnight. It probably would take a year for us to get this through."

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