

Keeping it Natural

Facts on the Village of Howard's Green Space Signage Program

Our community is blessed with significant natural land and water resources. Some of these lands are preserved in the form of parks, trails, creeks, fields, wetlands and woods. Often, they are found on public property, such as parks and natural areas, but they can also be on private property and are protected through a legal designation known as a conservancy easement. These areas provide our community with an abundance of natural areas and green spaces from which we all benefit. The reasons to maintain natural areas and conservancies are many. In addition, conservancies may protect or supplement:

- Park areas
- Storm water treatment facilities
- Wetland and floodplain protection
- Stream protection
- Natural buffer lands

Natural areas provide visual barriers and privacy, preserve forests and grasslands, support bird and wildlife habitat to better coexist with development, reduce pollution, support recreational activities and help preserve clean and plentiful water. Most often residents find these spaces visually pleasing and enjoy some privacy, even in highly developed urban conditions. Natural areas benefit property owners and are often the reason residents bought their properties as opposed to a lot without them. They enjoy not having to see neighbors out their back windows.

That makes sense, but why is the village adding signs to mark natural areas now?

The Village of Howard started working on adequately marking and monitoring its public properties and conservancies in response to property owners notifying the village of trespass issues into these areas. The signs are being placed to assist property owners in identifying property boundaries and conservancy easements in the hopes they will self-regulate and monitor appropriate land uses going forward.

Why not just tell the landowner? Why are you putting up physical signs?

Property lines are well understood and are more clearly identified, while conservancy boundaries can be easily overlooked. Signs are lasting reminders and visually inform current and future property owners of natural spaces so that they are aware of the surroundings and can appropriately monitor property use. They also help protect public lands and conservancies from encroachments that can be problematic for property owners in the future.

Why is this important?

The village is primarily concerned with private improvements or structures that have been placed on public property or lands. Storage sheds, fences and pools placed over easement lines will cause property owners and the village difficulty in the future if left unresolved. In other cases, property owners may have graded land or are maintaining (cutting) vegetation beyond their property lines or into conservancies. Property owners who have physical structures or fences placed on village property will be individually notified and given information about action that needs to be taken. Property owners cutting vegetation or landscaping on village property or in conservancies will be advised to stop those maintenance activities.

Until now, I wasn't aware of these conservancies. Can you explain in more detail?

Conservancies may be in the form of parcels of land or property owned by the village but are most often easements. The vast majority of easements are included on original subdivision plats. They existed before lots were purchased or homes were built and are intended to remain in a natural condition as grass, brush and/or woods without maintenance. Conservancies are generally located to provide environmental protection or might buffer natural/park spaces, storm water ponds and other features such as wetlands or streams. These

conservancies along with many other types of easements have existed for years, and nothing has changed except for the addition of signs.

Why wasn't I told about the conservancy easements or my property lines?

Unfortunately, the majority of property owners are not aware of the many types of easements that are included on their properties, including conservancies. Other common easement types that are part of subdivision lots may be for utilities, drainage, stormwater, access and for other purposes. Although the village wishes it could prevent property owner misunderstandings, it is the obligation of the seller, realtor, banks, and title companies to inform buyers about the many details of their property purchase.

Will every affected private property owner have a sign? What do the signs look like?

Not necessarily, and not everything can be marked. The goal is to place small brown signs (6" x 6") at every other lot line, corners and angle points.

When should I expect to see these signs be placed?

The village notified residents and began installing signs this spring. It is hoped that the project can be completed this summer.

Who will be placing the signs?

Staff placing the signs are summer engineering students who will be wearing fluorescent safety yellow T-shirts with a small Village of Howard logo on the front. They will be locating property corners, measuring distances, and carrying signs and posts.

If I have questions, who can I call?

Please call Howard's Public Works Department at (920) 434-4060. The Public Works director or other staff members are happy to answer questions and assist you.