TAKING A DIM VIEW OF RIDGELINE DEVELOPMENT

Let's stop using the word development to describe the building of homes and businesses in woodland areas or on farms. This use of the word gives unfair advantage to those who would further change New England's lovely rural countryside.

Equating development with commercial-residential construction elevates the seventh definition of the word from my American Heritage dictionary ahead of the first. "To convert (a tract of land) to a specific purpose, as by building extensively" is the seventh. "To expand or realize the potentialities of" or "to bring gradually to a fuller, greater, or better state" is the first.

Who could possibly argue against development in general? Education is a form of development. Processing photographic film is a form of development. The growth of a human from infant to adulthood is a form of development.

The original settlement of New England was a form of development. The construction of woodland trails and trail markers on old farmsteads is a form of development.

Commercial-residential construction is only one of many kinds of development. To bankers, contractors and tax assessors, this activity is usually seen as a good thing. To long-term residents and wilderness enthusiasts, it is often seen as a crime against tradition and nature, respectively.

With real estate conversions, the developers usually win, in part because they have spun the language to their advantage. From the human point of view, being developed for any purpose (including wilderness preservation) is better than to remain undeveloped.

This column was prompted by blight I experienced last week at Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington. I was there for a planning committee funded by the Connecticut Humanities Council to help develop this aesthetically pleasing and educational property to its maximum potential. Designed by the pioneering female architect Theodate Pope Riddle near the turn of the 20th century, Hill-Stead is an art museum within a beautiful Colonial Revival mansion tucked beneath the volcanic Metacomet Ridge. Thanks to the owner's private generosity, Hill-Stead is now a public treasure, site of the nationally acclaimed Sunken Garden Poetry Festival.

As our meeting ended, we walked outside to take in the sweeping views of the Farmington Valley. There, dangling over the edge of the 300-foot-high backbone of central Connecticut, were two houses I had never seen before.

Perhaps they were present during my earlier visits, which took place when lush summer foliage obscured them. But for at least five or more months of the year, these modern private houses intrude on an otherwise bucolic view as if they were pimples on the beautiful face of the ridge.

My first thought after seeing these houses was that the best thing we could do to develop Hill-Stead would be to un-develop the homes from its still-beautiful, but now corrupted view.

Before you blame the homeowners, who among us would not appreciate an overlook of a scenic valley not unlike that of an eagle aerie? Should the town be blamed for not being able to stop ridgeline pollution? Probably not, for towns often lack the power. Should the developer be blamed for wanting to turn a profit? Probably not, because that's often the main point.
The root of the problem lies with the Tragedy of the Commons, a parable in which one small entity
derives great benefit at the expense of countless thousands who lose just a little.

The Hill-Stead case is only one example of inappropriate ridgeline development in Connecticut.
Another vivid example in my life involves northbound travelers heading to or beyond interstate Exit
68 in Tolland.

For 20 years I enjoyed an unblemished view of a beautiful ridge for several minutes before getting
on the interstate. Then, one day, a house-pimple showed up. It's still there, slightly bothering me and
probably tens of thousands of others day after day.

Ridgeline development is a form of landscape acne that won't go away by itself. So, let's develop
these ridges by somehow squeezing these private zits off our public faces.