

DIANE DOYLE*President, Doyle Enterprises, Saco*

Developing balance

PHOTO/DAVID A. RODGERS

Diane Doyle's approach to development is so smart and reasonable that it's baffling she's actually an industry radical. At a time when most developers eye farmland or open space simply for the number of one- or two-acre, single-family lots it can yield, Doyle takes those same parcels and finds ways to fit housing into as small an area as possible, preserving the rest as open space — preferably public recreation space.

Like all radicals, though, she has the unshakable conviction that her approach is the right one. "What seems unnatural is what other [developers] do," says Doyle. "I think the natural thing is to try to make as little impact as possible and yet still create housing."

As president of Saco-based Doyle Enterprises, Doyle employs a staff of nine performing house renovations and other construction jobs to feed what she calls her "habit" — conceiving ludicrously ambitious developments that also help preserve the natural features and open spaces that are disappearing under southern Maine's still unchecked sprawl. More developers and landowners should take note of her example, before Maine's character is swamped under the generic wave of the Northeast megalopolis.

Her first big project, Ferry Landing (near Ferry Beach in Saco), used a cluster development technique to squeeze 28 houses into 11 acres of a 19-acre wooded lot. That allowed her to donate the remaining eight acres to Saco Bay Trails, which built woodland walking paths for both Ferry Landing homeowners and the public to enjoy. "I would have made more money if I had sold [traditional] lots on that site, but I really wanted to create this whole concept" of combining development with conservation, she says.

Doyle, 43, describes her projects with such energy and passion that you get the impression she'd make an impact on Maine no matter what industry she'd chosen. But the Pittsburgh native, who graduated from Carnegie Mellon University with an eco-



nomics degree and worked in both the manufacturing and mail-order catalog industries, followed an unlikely path to becoming a developer.

She moved to Maine in 1985, but after a divorce in 1996 began looking for a job that offered the chance to stay home with her kids, at the time aged two, three and five. Doyle had run a house-painting company in college, which, to her, seemed like ample training to take on a whole house renovation. So that year, she bought a run-down farmhouse in Buxton and began doing much of the demolition and renovation work herself, eventually selling the house for a profit.

After that job, she bought and renovated a series of five houses across York County, adding skilled staff along the way. By 2000, she decided to try building her own multi-home development — Ferry Landing — never mind that she'd never even built a house before. "I've always felt like I could do whatever I want. I really have," Doyle says.

Doyle's latest project, known as Graves Hill in Portland, shows how adaptable her underlying development concept can be. When she realized her initial idea to create a Ferry Landing-type cluster development would require significant blasting and degradation of the 18-acre hilltop site, Doyle decided to build up: She conceived two condominium towers, one 13 stories and one 14 stories, whose small footprint would leave more than seven acres of undeveloped wooded land she plans to donate to Portland Trails.

Doyle backed off that design, too, after deciding that the buildings were too tall and would have too much visual impact on her neighbors. She had her architect design lower buildings, making them less visible above the trees on the hillside — and that sensitivity helped turn most of her opponents into supporters of the development. On Aug. 31, the Portland Planning Board voted 6-0 to approve the project.

Turning opponents into supporters is another of Doyle's talents that is attracting attention. Owners of large parcels of land are now calling her and asking if she can help them create their own combination development/conservation projects that allow them to realize a profit on their property without destroying its entire character.

Thanks to one such call, she's already planning her next development: taking a 164-acre site in Saco, using 30 acres for a 40-house cluster development, and preserving more than 100 acres — complete with woods and ponds — on which Saco Bay Trails can build a new trail network. "I like to tell people, 'If the property is for sale, it's probably going to be developed,'" says Doyle, "so why not work with someone who has a conscience?"

Sean Donahue

A novel approach: Doyle's revised Graves Hill design, below, won unanimous approval from the city of Portland

