



# Building Better Homes and Communities

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**Affordability and Choice Today**

## ACT Solutions

### A Unique Single-Family Dwelling for a Multi-Family Community

*Whole Village Ltd., Town of Caledon, ON*

#### Issue

In the late 1990s, a group of parents from the Waldorf School in Thornhill, Ont., just north of Toronto, dreamed of developing a cohousing project and organic farm. They eventually chose a 77.3 hectare (191 acres) tract of farmland in rural Caledon, an hour from Toronto, to develop Whole Village, their experiment in green collective living.

Official plans in the Town of Caledon and Peel Region do not permit community housing outside of designated urban areas. Caledon land use regulations restrict development on agricultural land to one single family dwelling per property, explicitly ruling out the kind of collaborative multi-family housing development the Whole Village proponents had in mind.

#### Plan

The ACT project team's purpose was to overcome this regulatory hurdle. The end result would be a set of zoning regulations allowing community-based housing. The

project would also demonstrate new, environmentally friendly housing options for rural environments through a project incorporating the following features:

- ❑ a collaborative housing development that accommodates a variety of family types with different financial resources;
- ❑ an organic farm that will reclaim land that has been out of production; and
- ❑ stewardship of a significant area of land, including natural forest and wetland.

#### Project team

Whole Village Ltd.  
Town of Caledon  
Peel Region  
Community groups  
Escarpment Biosphere  
Conservancy

#### Results

The Whole Village Ltd. families bought their tract of farmland in 2000. Five years later they could



**Greenhaven, November 2005**

**Built for energy efficiency, the unique eco-house includes daylight from skylights, radiant heating using ground source heat pumps, super insulation, passive solar, and shared spaces and equipment.**

*Source: Whole Village Ltd.*

look back on a record of achievement, with goals met or exceeded in most respects, except for one critical area.

The Whole Village team hired a host of consultants with expertise in areas of architecture, engineering, energy efficiency, community living, housing, law, finance, construction management, permaculture design, land stewardship and resource conservation.

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Even before they purchased the Caledon property, they began a long series of consultations and discussions with Town of Caledon planning staff, the Mayor and councillors, to whom they explained the theory and practice of cohousing and their beliefs in conservation, energy efficiency, green building techniques, sustainable agriculture, and alternative waste management.

Still, they failed to convince the Town that multi-family housing belongs in a rural setting. The Town stayed with its long-standing policy to restrict development in areas zoned rural or agricultural and allow only one residence per property.

Despite efforts by project proponents to woo the neighbours in the early stages of planning, by explaining their ideas in detail, most neighbours lobbied Council and signed a petition opposing the plan to put 30 housing units on the land.

The objectors were worried about increased traffic, population density, noise, adverse impacts on water quality and so on. Some even thought Whole Village was some kind of cult or commune.

At this point, Whole Village members abandoned their efforts to build multi-family housing and opted instead to design a building that would comply with existing zoning while remaining true to the spirit of community housing.

Officials in the Caledon planning department told them there was no cut and dried criteria for what constituted a "single-family dwelling". Such a determination was qualitative, they said, and would be made by a plans examiner.



**Greenhaven is a rambling, one-storey building of 1,421 m<sup>2</sup> (15,300 sq. ft.) with 10 suites.**

Source: Whole Village Ltd.

Whole Village member Denis Brown, an architect, then went to work. He created a housing design that the membership believed would qualify as a single family dwelling while still functioning as cohousing. It was the plan for what eventually became Greenhaven, a rambling, one-storey building of 1,421 m<sup>2</sup> (15,300 sq. ft.) with 10 suites, each with a private bath, wet bar (sink and refrigerator) as well as a private outdoor terrace. The suites range in size from a bachelor to two bedrooms. There is only one main kitchen where members can take communal meals. (An auxiliary apartment, a permitted use, contains a second, smaller kitchen.) The single main kitchen, members reasoned, made it a single family residence.

Town planners, however, disagreed and, in the summer of 2002, denied Whole Village's application for a building permit. The membership then took the Town to court. In their deposition, members stated their intention to live as a family. The case was heard in March 2003 and Whole Village won, with costs awarded as well. Finally, in the spring of 2004, Whole Village got its permit and construction began on Greenhaven. It was ready for occupancy in January 2006.

Whole Village members have chosen a registered co-op as their ownership model so they can control who lives in the building. They ruled out condominium-style ownership because that would

have made Greenhaven a multi-family dwelling, contrary to zoning.

The cost of individual suites works out to about \$180,000 for a two-bedroom unit. Whole Village members say this compares favourably with local prices when the customized design plus energy-saving, ecological and environmental features are factored in. Members believe a life-cycle analysis of their building would show that Greenhaven is more economical to run than a conventional structure, taking into account energy and water-saving measures, and the quality of building materials used.

Whole Village proponents have also made notable progress on land stewardship issues, another important objective of their project.

Working with the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy, members drew up a "conservation easement" for their property, a rarity in rural Ontario. It is registered on the deed and will be enforced for 999 years. The easement divides the property into four zones: wetland, woodlot, agricultural, and development. Each segment has a different set of covenants specifying what can and cannot be done there.

Said Jeff Gold, Whole Village project facilitator: "As part of our plan to reverse decades of environmental degradation, we have removed livestock from sensitive wetland, hillsides and woodlots. We have planted more than 8,000 trees and organized a shared garden that supplies 25 families with a weekly basket of organically-grown food."

Monthly work bees, focused on land stewardship issues, are open to the public. Whole Village also periodically plays host to local high school students with "ecospiritual experience days" that involve them in various hands-on land stewardship and agricultural activities.

The members believe their interaction with Town officials over a two-year period, and their input to public consultations, had a positive impact resulting in an amendment to the Town's Official Community Plan. The amendment updated policy with respect to agricultural and rural areas. It spells out permitted land uses — with respect to agriculture, environmental protection and rural economic development — and serves as the basis for the evaluation of development proposals within these areas. Numerous sections of the amendment contain wording that reflects the long-standing environmental beliefs and practices of Whole Village.

### **Related reports**

*Whole Village King Rural Cohousing* (Whole Village Ltd., Town of Caledon, 2006)

This report is available from the ACT website. See "ACT projects & solutions".

### **Contact**

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### **About Whole Village**

We are a diverse group of people of all ages. We do not ascribe to any specific political, religious, or ethnic path, and in fact, welcome all who share our vision. Ages range from 4 to 70 years. Our members include professionals, craftpersons, educators as well as farmers. We use an inclusive process of consensus to reach all community decisions.

### **Our Vision**

"We intend to create a community with a commitment to sustainability and land stewardship that provides a place to farm and to live in harmony with the natural habitat."

[www.wholevillage.org](http://www.wholevillage.org) - 2004

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### **ACT Administration**

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