

Building on Hillsides

Don't let it slide

By Shelly Whitehead
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Developers look at the region's green hillsides and see mounds of dollars just waiting to be made.

Home buyers eye these perches and envision dream dwellings loaded with windows for panoramic views.

And city leaders survey these slopes and see the promise of new life for their aging urban cores.

But for some, the interest in developing the hillsides, especially in Northern Kentucky, is cause for concern. Experts say this area racks up some of the nation's highest costs annually from landslide damage. In the midst of the current wave of development on Northern Kentucky's hillsides, some worry that few people fully understand that threat, even as they build, buy, sell and even oversee hillside projects.

Complicating oversight of hillside development in Northern Kentucky is a lack of a uniform system across the region's planning jurisdictions to assess a development's threat of landslides.

Two recent projects have raised awareness. Along a series of sprawling hillsides along interstate highways in Newport and Covington, site preparation for two multimillion-dollar developments has transformed a handful of verdant knolls from leafy green to earthy brown.

The \$50 million Views residential development in Covington will cover the hillside west of the 1200 block of Dixie Highway with about 124 high-end homes. Farther east, the \$100 million Newport Pavilion retail development will blanket the slopes beneath Wiedemann Hill, west of Interstate 471, with an array of retailers.

They are massive projects on steep terrain in a region notorious for landslides, like much of Cincinnati and southeast Indiana. That is why they have attracted the attention of Cincinnati geologist and landslide expert Tim Agnello.

He recently highlighted Northern Kentucky's hillside development wave in a presentation at the First North American Landslide Conference in Vail, Colo. Agnello said projects perched on steep slopes are inherently difficult to engineer, highlighting the need for better professional and public education about the landslide-prone nature of Northern Kentucky.

"There's a lot of science that is just not getting the public, so the public doesn't understand where the problems are because it never becomes news until there's a disaster. Then everybody says, 'Why didn't anyone tell us about this?' Well, the science was always there, but it's not getting out to the public," Agnello said.

Agnello believes the growing interest in such projects, particularly in Northern Kentucky, demands better community awareness that many slopes may not be suitable for certain types of projects.

Hillside Trust Executive Director Eric Russo agrees. His Cincinnati-based hillside preservation organization reviews projects proposed for slopes across the region, and he hopes Northern Kentucky has learned something from the lessons Cincinnati has experienced over the years.

Costly landslide damage, particularly in places like Mount Adams, prompted Cincinnati to establish a mapping and oversight system that identifies slide-prone areas and mandates geotechnical review of developments proposed for such sites.

Though the Hillside Trust regularly reviews hillside development proposals for planning and zoning bodies in Northern Kentucky, Russo said there is no uniform system of oversight across jurisdictions. In fact, Russo said he first learned of the Views development while driving down I-75 last winter.

"In late November, I saw the whole hillside being clear-cut ... and I thought, what's going on there? Who allowed that to happen? This is one of the steepest hillsides in Cincinnati or Northern Kentucky that's ever been developed. ... It's mind-boggling," Russo said.

"What's confusing to me is the level of multi-jurisdictional influence on properties like this. ... Like (for the Views property) there were two different jurisdictions involved, Covington and the Northern Kentucky Area Planning Commission. And in Campbell, Kenton and Boone counties, there's a large number, too. So there's a lack of an overall big picture or plan for doing these kinds of things."

Though there's no uniform hillside development oversight in Northern Kentucky, city leaders say they do thoroughly review such projects. For instance, Newport City Manager Tom Fromme said the Newport Pavilion project is directly overseen by the city's planning and zoning body.

On two occasions, Newport city commissioners asked the Hillside Trust to review the proposal. As a result, Fromme said concerns about slippage at the top of Wiedemann Hill were addressed by the developer, Bear Creek Capital, of Cincinnati.

Repeated calls to that company were not returned. But Fromme said their plans call for construction of a system of terraces and retaining walls which city engineers believe are adequate to address specific site concerns.

"I've actually had some people say the top (of Wiedemann Hill) will be more secure than it is today with these retaining walls and how it will be terraced off. It will be less prone to slippage," he said.

"So at this point, I'm pretty comfortable with it and that it will be in better condition than it was before."

Covington city leaders are equally confident in oversight for the Views. Though the city no longer has its own planning and zoning department, developments receive preliminary review and ongoing oversight from the Northern Kentucky Area Planning Commission.

Scott Hiles, the commission's deputy director for infrastructure engineering, said the Views are one of numerous hillside developments his organization oversees. He said that each stage of such projects - from infrastructure improvements, grading and site preparation, to street placement and residential construction - must be reviewed and approved by planning commission staff and other agencies and governmental bodies.

Hiles said revisions must be made to address inadequacies before each stage of construction ensues. He said that while revisions have been made throughout site preparation for the Views, none has involved problems with hillside stability.

"It's all been design-related," he said. "Like the design of the streets and issues about making sure emergency units could access condo units. ... But they've worked with the city engineer to make sure the grades and turns are okay so that emergency units could get to the condos."

The planning commission's continued oversight and input has been welcomed by Views developer Joshua One, according to the company's co-managing partner, Paul Zeltwanger. Additionally, he said developers behind such multi-million dollar hillside projects would be foolish to cut corners on the engineering work necessary to ensure the project is stable. In that sense, Zeltwanger said hillside developers tend to regulate themselves.

"We spent double the amount of time and resources on engineering (compared with a flat site) ... to make sure we had a very good well thought-out plan in place," Zeltwanger said.

"We wanted to ensure that our foundations were put into bedrock so we removed about 170,000 yards of dirt ... so that as we're putting the foundations and retention walls in, they're pierced into the bedrock that sits on that hill. ... And we pay for ... a geotechnical engineer who is there reviewing all the work that is going on. ... That's how we address (the issues of a sloped site) from our end."

Though Hiles feels his agency provides ample oversight for hillside developments, he believes some uniform policies are needed since each of the 11 planning bodies in Northern Kentucky has slightly different regulations. And

although every Kenton County city has hillside development controls in their zoning ordinances mandating geotechnical investigations for sloped properties, Hiles said cities could use a well-researched, up-to-date template to direct those investigations.

That's why Hiles said the planning commission is working on model ordinances that include guidelines for oversight of hillside developments in Northern Kentucky.

"We thought we would take the responsibility upon ourselves -- because some of these regulations haven't been updated since 1982 - to get something together and offer it to all the planning commissions," Hiles said.

"This will not only update (zoning regulations), but it will get us some consistency across Northern Kentucky. ... The place for hillside controls is in the zoning ordinances. ... In the model zoning ordinance this agency is putting together ... that issue of hillside development is going to be looked at."

The public has shown little trepidation about the development of local slopes. That may be, as Agnello believes, because so few are aware of how prone the area's hillsides are to sliding. It also may be because many people inherently trust city leaders, planners and even developers to make sure these projects are stable.

That appears to be the case for most property owners living around the sites for the Views and the Newport Pavilion. They invariably said they trusted the oversight processes currently in place. In fact, people like Pike Street apartment building owner Rob Mangeot believe the whole surrounding Covington neighborhood will be much better off once the hillside is filled with expensive homes.

"The Northern Kentucky Area Planning Commission did the plan review, and I am sure they made sure there was adequate control of erosion and water before they were approved and issued permits for construction," he said.

"I think this will be good for business here."

About a block south, Lee Goetz watched a line of dump trucks roll up and down the Views site just across from the Southgate Street home where he has spent all of his 75 years. The rumbling trucks rattle window panes and spew clouds of dust, but Goetz has nothing bad to say about the development, particularly now that a retaining wall is in place along the other side of his street.

"Before they put that wall up, I was concerned about slides," he said. "But that wall went up last week, and that's going to be great. ... And it might do good things for property values."

Property values are already pretty good on Wiedemann Hill, where people like Gail Sumerel live in \$600,000 to \$1.2 million homes with breathtaking views. Sumerel loves her lofty home and believes the Newport Pavilion project beginning on the hillside below will only improve the neighborhood. "We consider it progress," she said. "We know they're going to put a wall up and they have a lot of engineers and people who know what they're doing, so we trust them. ... I'm hoping they know what they're doing."