

Prairie Crossing at Twenty

December 2014: A (Very) Brief History

By Nathan Aaberg, Prairie Crossing resident and Liberty Prairie Foundation staff member

On December 16, 1994, John and Marianne Conway purchased the first home in Prairie Crossing at 1494 Potawatomi Road. Twenty years later, Prairie Crossing is a thriving community and a nationally renowned example of how conservation principles can be integrated into a suburban neighborhood. Starting with this issue and continuing through next December, we will be taking the occasion of this 20th anniversary to share the history and unique features of your home community. Whether you are a new or long-time resident, we hope that what we share will deepen your appreciation of Prairie Crossing.

The Back Story

Before Prairie Crossing was a twinkle in anyone's eyes, it was a farm like much of the rest of Lake County. You can still see traces of that history in the hedgerow of closely-planted osage orange trees along Hedgerow Drive as well as some of the buildings at the farm complex at the north end of Prairie Crossing. If you look carefully near the pine trees in the open area south and east of Prairie Trail and north of Hedgerow, you can even find the foundation of an old farmhouse.

Then came the drama. A developer purchased the land with plans of putting 2,400 homes on one-acre lots in a dense, conventional layout. Neighbors, Lake County, and the Village of Grayslake engaged in a lengthy legal battle to prevent density of that level.

As a result of the settlement that emerged, conservationists Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley bought the property in 1987. The Donnelley family consequently formed Prairie Holdings Corporation with a group of neighbors and asked George and Victoria Post Ranney to develop the 677-acre parcel, hoping to provide an alternative to the prevailing pattern of suburban sprawl.

Planning and Construction

In 1992, the George and Vicky assembled a planning team of forward-thinking experts from around the country to imagine the features of a conservation-oriented, cohesive community and to work out the practical details at this site. From

early on, the team was committed to working under the ten Guiding Principles as way to stay focused on the core values and ideals of the community. You can find these principles at www.prairiecrossing.com.

What stands out about the final plan is how so many different, innovative elements were woven together to create the setting for a whole, vibrant community that is also mindful of the natural community of which we are members. For example, clustering the homes allowed for the creation of extensive open space and also the application of New Urbanist principles that promote connected community living in ways that were once the norm in America. Developing a stormwater management system that mimics nature allowed the open space to serve multiple functions simultaneously and led to the creation of one of Prairie Crossing's most appreciated amenities – Lake Aldo Leopold.

Chronological Highlights

Apr. 1993	Permits received for Phase 1
June 1996	Prairie Crossing stable opened
Aug. 1996	Byron Colby Barn reconstructed
Aug. 1996	1 st Prairie Crossing Metra station
Sep. 1999	First class at PC Charter School
Sep. 2000	Peak power plant proposed for 137 & Harris Road is voted down by the Village of Libertyville
Dec. 2002	PCHOA assumes management
Apr. 2004	2 nd Metra station inaugurated
Dec. 2005	Last single family home sold
Feb. 2006	First condominium unit sold

Vision + Residents = Prairie Crossing

The residents, especially the earliest ones, are a critical part of the Prairie Crossing story as well. Early residents learned about Prairie Crossing in many ways (from creative ads on WBEZ to just happening to drive by) and decided that this unique place was the right place for them and their values. One family told me of plunking down a down payment in a sales office room with nothing more tangible to look at than plans and a vase with a single flower. By choosing to buy and become engaged here, every resident helped realize the dream of Prairie Crossing.

And from early on, the people attracted to Prairie Crossing proved to be civic-minded, compassionate, energetic people who desired to create a real community, and today there a multitude of social traditions and events. There has also been a strong spirit of volunteerism as residents have pitched in together for those social events, for taking care of the natural areas, and for taking care of each other.

Twenty years later, Prairie Crossing is a place like no other. It is a unique conservation community that cherishes open space and the Midwestern roots of its place. It is a model that people from around the country and the world come to learn from. And it is a community that has been made and is sustained by the active engagement of its diverse residents.



Prairie Crossing residents carry out a prescribed burn in one of the common areas. Community spirit and engagement on the land have made our community unique from the beginning.

Why “Prairie Crossing”?

“Prairie” refers to the intention from early on to integrate open space into the community by clustering homes and managing the open space largely for prairie, the beautiful ecosystem that once covered much of Illinois. “Crossing” refers to the junction of two different railroad lines (the Canadian National and METRA’s Fox Lake line) just south of Prairie Crossing which promised easy METRA access to downtown once stations were built.



Learn more about Prairie Crossing at prairiecrossing.com and libertyprairie.org.

NEXT MONTH: A closer look at some of the environmental features of Prairie Crossing you might not know about.

Left: Photo taken looking north from intersection of Route 137, Harris Road, and Casey Road. Look carefully and you can see the outline of Lake Aldo Leopold with the different shelves of depth to mimic natural habitats. Photo taken by Terry Evans in the summer of 1994.