

View Point

CLEARING LAND FOR A VIEW, A BUILDING SITE, A ROAD, OR A MEADOW

By Christine Bates
christine@mainstreetmag.com

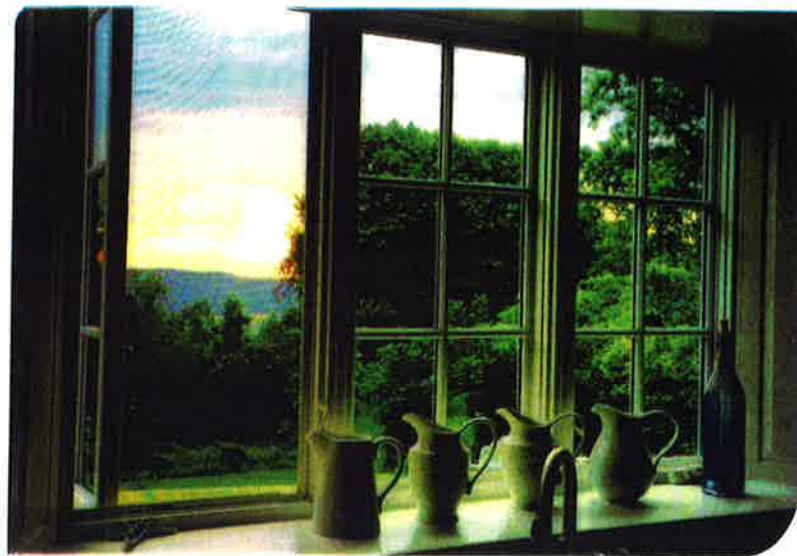
The silhouette of the Catskills stretches across our far Western horizon. The Taconic Mountain chain lines New York's border with Connecticut and Massachusetts and the Berkshires rise east of the Housatonic River. This is still a land of expansive views in all directions, but sometimes you can't see the view for the forest or the trees. This month's Main Street real estate article examines the benefits and challenges of clearing land to build a house, put in a driveway, or open up a view to the sky.

Big views sell houses

"The only time I ever sold a property from our website without the buyer actually visiting the property was because of the photo of the view from Belgo Road," according to Elyse Harney of Elyse Harney Real Estate. She guesstimates that as many as 10% to 20% of home seekers are adamant about a view – about the same number as want to be secluded surrounded by trees in the woods. Both Harney and Katherine Dunlop, of Katherine Dunlop Real Estate, agree that western views that capture the last moment of the day and the sunset are the most sought after.

The view that built the house

Finding a spot to build a home with a view, or just a open, cleared site can involve hiking through



Above: Looking out at the view from a kitchen on Belgo Road. Below: Views from a Lakeville home. Photos courtesy of Elyse Harney Real Estate.

woods, examining topographical maps, and consulting with excavators and landscapers. A Catskill view from Skunk's Misery Road in Pine Plains was confirmed when the buyer paid \$40 to have someone climb up a tree and take a photo.

The owner of 33 Ore Hill Road in South Kent shared the process of creating a forever view. The six-bedroom house with 40 acres and a pool is now on the market for \$6 million (see photo on next page).

"Once we decided to build our house at the top of our original plot of land in South Kent, we knew we wanted it to fit in naturally and not stand out. This decision dictated not only the type of house we would build, but also the design of the land on which the house would sit. The hill at that time was totally wooded. We were not aware of the magnificent view that was out there until we started taking down a few trees to start the project. While the house was being designed, additional trees were taken down very judiciously for the house site. Some might have just clear-cut the area because of the impact of the view; but we left standing many trees (all great oaks) that to this day weave in and around the house, some in front of the view. We've had to add lightening rods to several since they remain close to the house."

"The house site is probably about only three acres and the cutting was done by our designer/architect/builder who had studied with Frank Lloyd Wright and had an instinctive eye for nature and how it interacts with housing. The really cool thing is that we used all of the trees we took down ... and the stone recovered from blasting the foundation. Through the use of a portable mill that resided on the hill for about six months all of the beams, and all of the floorboards in the house came from those great oaks. And all of the stone used inside and out of the house for fireplaces, siding, and stone walls also came from the site... Also many large boulders

were meticulously placed alongside of the climbing driveway to prevent erosion and to add to the aesthetic of the approach."

How to go about clearing the land

Before you begin cutting down trees, first investigate any local restrictive regulations. For example Connecticut has rules about how many stumps you can bury. Ancram and Amenia in New York have rules about building on ridgelines. Some towns require permits to clear land.

Landscapers and excavators stress the importance of judiciously clearing the land. "I love trees," said Florian Thomas, a contractor in Sharon. "I always try to save the white and red oaks, and the sugar maples." Identifying valuable trees like black walnut that can be sold can reduce the final cost of land clearing. Leaving key specimen trees will increase the desirability of the property dramatically. Erosion must be considered on rocky hill tops. Frank Duncan of Northwest Landscaping in Millerton, NY said the best time to clear land is in the spring or fall – the off-season for landscapers. But you should consult with your landscaper when the leaves are still on the trees. Consult with arborists about the types of trees on the property, their age and health. Don't over harvest. Duncan reminds, "There's no way to hit rewind when it comes to land clearing. Make sure your decisions are informed."

Everyone Main Street consulted about clearing land for residential purposes agreed that commercial loggers are not the best alternative. Their prices may be lower, but Duncan observed that they typically have a disregard for nature, and damage trees they don't cut.

Continued on next page ...

How much does it cost?

Every project is different, depending on size, slope, soil conditions, type of vegetation, and disposal of sawdust, chips, and stumps. There is no simple answer. The website www.homewys.com estimates around \$8,000 to clear an acre in our area. Duncan says that most clearing jobs are on half an acre to one acre and can involve as much pruning as actual tree removal. Drew Hingson of Klemm Realty has seen a range of \$2,000 to \$10,000 an acre, depending on the method, the extent of the "grooming," and the wallet of the owner. Frank Duncan agreed with a mid range of \$4,000 to \$5,000 per acre, but cautions the price could rise to \$12,000 an acre if all stumps were removed and a lawn seeded. Jim Murphy, who has a reputation for artfully clearing land and a long waiting list of clients, provided a ballpark estimate of \$4,500 to \$7,500. Additionally, the gravel road required to get to the site would cost \$30 to \$60 a linear foot

How much is it worth?

If you know what you're doing and buy at the right price, clearing land and adding the infrastructure of driveways, roads and utilities can be very profitable. Dunlop estimated that land is 25% to 30% more valuable once cleared, or as she calls it, "groomed." John Panzer, who specializes in selling raw land for Elyse Harney Real Estate, sited a large parcel in Millbrook which was purchased for \$500,000. Artfully divided into five estate sized lots with views, each then sold for \$500,000.

Drew Hingson, Klemm Realty's land specialist, cautions the range is wide. "You could triple the value or come out with little or no profit."

Dunlop, Hingson, and Panzer all agreed that raw land prices, view or no view, remain depressed. Hingson estimated that prices in Columbia County are two thirds lower than at the height of the market, and 50% less in Dutchess County. Dunlop says that the prices of land sold now range from \$12,000 to \$15,000 acre, "If you're lucky. It's very hard to get \$20,000." Other brokers reported price levels as low as \$7,000 an acre for some properties to find buyers.

In 1998 Elise and Arnold Goodman had been looking for a private property with a view for eight years before hiking into the woods on Skunk's Misery Road with realtor Katherine Dunlop. She showed them where a Catskill view might be and they reconfirmed it with maps and aerial photographs. They paid \$350,000 for 165 acres, built a mile long, gravel road, selectively cleared some of the land and erected a contemporary Dutch barn home. "We had no idea that the view would be so panoramic, so expansive from North to South." They have now parceled off 50+ acres with the same magnificent view, which is on the market through Drew Hingson for \$1,150,000.



Above: Magnificent views of the Catskills were revealed after clearing 15 acres on this Skunk's Misery Road property in Pine Plains. Photo by Christine Bates. Left: Sky views from the living room at 33 Ore Hill Road in South Kent. Photo courtesy of Randy O'Rourke and William Pitt Sotheby's International. For a video of the view go to <http://vimeo.com/99663829>. Below: Land before and after a herd of goats browsed on the brush. Photo supplied by Rent-A-Ruminant.



Rent a goat - organic land clearing

With no noise, no fumes, no clippings to discard, and no scattering of seeds to grow back next year, some property owners are renting goats to help them eliminate brush and even poison oak. This is especially effective in deeply sloped areas and wetlands where it would be difficult for humans or machines to tackle the job. Locally at the Vanderbilt Mansion in Hyde Park, goats graze on seven hilly acres and at Wilderstein mansion in Rhinebeck they keep the underbrush under control.

Seattle-based Rent-A-Ruminant's founder,

Tammy Dunakin, estimates that in these difficult situations, a herd of goats would do the job for 75% less than humans. She calculates that a herd of around 100 goats working 12-hour days could clear an acre of waist high brush in four days. If you are interested in starting your own rent-a-goat business, Dunakin is now offering franchises globally and hopes to be the Starbucks of land clearing goats. (www.rentaruminant.com).