

Community meeting set for unique cohousing proposal in Roanoke

New living concept proposed for city

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A retired electrical engineer has designs on building the Roanoke area's first senior "cohousing" development on the site of the former Countryside Golf Course.

Paul Wyar has proposed to buy 6 acres of the site near the former driving range for \$35,000 per acre to develop 30 residences for seniors who are seeking an active, Christian-based lifestyle. He calls it [Spiritserv](#).

Wyar and city officials are hosting a community meeting about the proposal at 6:30 p.m. Thursday in the William Fleming High School cafeteria, where Wyar will describe his plan.

Cohousing is a concept developed in Denmark in the 1980s, Wyar said, and there are perhaps 200 examples of it in the United States. The nearest senior cohousing development is ElderSpirit in Abingdon, though there is another [cohousing development in Blacksburg and one planned in Floyd](#).

City officials who must consider the idea as the seller of publicly owned land, and from a planning perspective, were unfamiliar with it.

"I wouldn't say we've been skeptical," said Roanoke Planning Director Chris Chittum, "but we've been trying to understand how it works because we don't have any experience with it yet."

"It's basically an intentional community," Wyar, 65, said. Residents choose to live there to be among people of shared values so they can build community instantly, he said.

Wyar said the residents become involved long before construction begins and decisions about everything from values reflected in service work to the physical structures are made by consensus.

"Everybody gets to know each other well before they move in," Wyar said. He's defined Spiritserv as having an ecumenical Christian flavor, though by law no one could be excluded based on religion, he said. Wyar is Catholic.

He believes residents will self-select to be among people who share their ideas, though he notes that the Abingdon development, which is Christian in principle, is home to a number of Buddhists.

Physically, the development is proposed as a mix of small, one-, two- and three-bedroom town homes arranged in a circle, facing inward. At the center will be a community house — a staple of cohousing.

The community house is a central gathering place with a living room, large kitchen and some guest rooms for visitors.

"Everybody's independently living, but they have the opportunity for community," Wyar said. "You can always find somebody to talk to."

All parking is at the edge of the development, he said, so the emphasis is on walking to keep seniors, who can fall victim to isolation and loneliness, remain active and connected through incidental contact with neighbors as well as shared service work.

The residences are small, one-floor abodes, the largest of them under 1,000 square feet. They'll all be modular construction. About 20 will be for sale under \$150,000, while the remaining units will be rented.

The houses will be energy efficient, with solar heating.

Residents will also pay a "condo fee" to cover lawn care, snow removal and other needs, Wyar said.

After he retired in 2013, Wyar, a Catawba Valley resident, set out to develop some senior town homes with a solar component. He happened upon the cohousing concept later.

Two years ago he had a group of 30 people interested in becoming the first residents of Spiritserv, but land acquisition has taken longer than expected. Wyar said he's looked all over the valley, with available land ranging from \$599,000 to \$2.5 million — all of it too expensive.

He kept coming back to the land at Countryside, which was marked for mixed residential development in the master plan the city developed for the old golf course.

Chittum traveled to Abingdon with Wyar to learn about cohousing.

"My first impression was, it's completely normal and fit in with the surrounding neighborhood really well," he said. "It just looked like housing."

The Roanoke City Council, which must approve the land sale, has been briefed on Wyar's proposal and called for the community meeting.

"Council and the administration wanted, before we go any further, to get the idea out before the community and see what the concerns are if there are any," Chittum said.

No one has contacted Chittum with any concerns in advance of the meeting, he said.

If all goes well, it will likely be a few months before council would hold a required public hearing about the sale of the 6 acres, Chittum said.

The land must also be rezoned from its current recreational designation — residual zoning from when the land was a golf course — to a designation that allows residences.

By Wyar's own timeline, if all goes perfectly, residents will be moving into Spiritserv by the end of 2017.