

McHenry Workforce Housing Development

Community Action details plan for Lake Hill project

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In an effort that Garrett County Community Action (GCCAC) says is representative of Garrett County's reputation for working together, a new development to be known as "Lake Hill" is designed to enable low- and moderate-income people to buy homes near their work. Calling the recent announcement by the Garrett County Commissioners in support of the Lake Hill Development "a great demonstration of how teamwork can be used to create affordable workforce housing in the McHenry area close to where jobs are located," Yoder pointed out that despite unemployment dropping in the county, the cost of housing has made it very difficult for young working families and even middle income persons to acquire a home in a market where the median home sales exceeds affordability ratios of median household incomes by ten when generally accepted rates are between two and three.

Yoder also pointed to the fact that existing employers seeking to expand or recruit workers for new businesses are increasingly expressing concern over housing affordability.

Jim Hinebaugh, the Garrett County Economic Development Director said as a result of the importance of housing to employers the Development Corporation and the Garrett County Chamber of Commerce have made housing a priority. "Housing is a critical economic development issue" Hinebaugh stated.

As was outlined to the county commissioners, GCCAC's proposal will utilize 40-50 acres and yield over 200 homes. Approximately 170 acres will be placed in a permanent development ban as either a conservancy or a buffer around the airport.

The presentation by Yoder showed a mix of house types and prices with the primary market being persons earning less than 150 percent of the area's household median income, currently \$60,000.

The county's land transfer as agreed upon by the commissioners will be made to a nonprofit land trust that will hold title to the property and provide land lease agreements to buyers. "The cost of the land is removed from the price of the house, making the home more affordable to buyers," Yoder explained.

Under the plan, the income goes to the trust to rehabilitate or develop housing in other parts of the county. Only persons earning less than 150 percent of the median income will be eligible for reduced prices. Higher income buyers will pay the full appraised market value.

Lake Hill has been described as growing out of efforts to find solutions to the problem of affordable workforce housing. The Garrett County Development Corporation and Community Action have led a three-year effort through a task force of over 30 people to devise such a plan.

According to Criss Kepple, Chairperson of the Development Corporation, the core of the plan describes strategies on how the community can work together to build and maintain housing that is affordable to people who work in the county and for young residents getting careers started in the community. “The plan specifically recommends that the county look for ways it can provide land and infrastructure to achieve that goal,” Kepple stated. “I believe Lake Hill provides an almost perfect site for a workforce housing community and clearly is consistent with the plan recommendation,” she said.

Kepple pointed out that the area is a major employment center where workers living in the new development do not have to travel far to work. “There is access to public utilities and the area is designated as a growth zone”. “It also provides our workers who help make Deep Creek Lake a very attractive place to also enjoy its amenities while saving on energy and transportation” Kepple said.

Yoder says he expects it will take several years to obtain necessary financing and obtain approval of plans. He also said that he anticipates a number of realtors and builders to participate in the build-out and marketing of the development.

“The McHenry’s business and technology park is expected to eventually attract businesses with higher wages,” Yoder said. “The Lake Hill housing development will support the county’s efforts to build the employment center by creating attractive housing for these future jobs but will also create housing for those already working in McHenry and at Garrett College as well.” he said.

According to the design approved by the commissioners, the adjacent softball and soccer fields will be improved and trail and picnic sites will be means of preserving green space.

Yoder describes the overall design as giving “the appearance of an attractive and pleasing small town. The uniqueness of this initiative is that it builds an attractive, sustainable community in an area rich with amenities. At the same time it builds a trust fund that will enable sustained work throughout the county. The Commissioners’ action can really make this a state model for Smart Growth,” he said.