



Site Plan for the SpiritServ community being developed near Roanoke.

Faith-based seniors get creative with housing solutions

By Nanette Levin, Special to The Catholic Virginian July 4, 2016

SpiritServ is an unusual idea borne from years of research by Paul Wyar in his quest to find a better way for older adults to live more economically, fully and collaboratively. It's not the first faith-based senior co-housing initiative in Virginia, but it will be a new concept in Roanoke.

While Wyar's initial research was focused on ecologically sound building innovations for seniors, he stumbled on co-housing along the way. This presented to him an ideal living approach for aging adults with ecumenical Christian values.

Wyar, a parishioner at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Salem, states denominations are not central for resident synergy – a shared priority on serving is more important for occupants who want to enjoy all this community can offer.

“Having played guitar for seniors, it saddened me to see so many folks who were housed, forgotten and lonely,” Wyar claims as he shares his impetus behind creating an active senior neighborhood focused on easier independence and service. “A co-housing community allows folks to contribute as much as they are able to in their retirement years.”

The project is being designed to appeal to those ages 50+ who seek a supportive living arrangement that offers private housing with shared community facilities, gardens, parking and maintenance. Residents will make collaborative decisions on final plot and community facility design. They also will be in charge of all the community and charitable activities.

Fr. Louis Benoit, a retired priest, is a potential resident at SpiritServ. He explains, “In years of active parish ministry, I have noticed two things about senior parish members. First, a number of them were living alone in large houses with yards that were getting to be too much for these senior members to take care of. These elderly parishioners did not need assisted living, but just a smaller place they could easily keep up with little help.”

He continues, “The second thing I noticed about many of these senior citizen parishioners is that some of them were living alone and did not have an adequate support system of other people around them. This was a concern for children not living close by. In a senior co-housing project, these needs can be addressed. People form a Christian community with people looking after each other and sharing some activities together.”

The project involves six acres of publicly-owned land, 30 modular homes ranging from 549 square feet for a one-bedroom, one-bath to 929 square feet for a two-bedroom, two-bath dwelling. Twenty will be sold as owner occupied units. Ten will be reserved for apartment rentals.

A common area house will be key as part of the community. This will include large rooms for recreation and gatherings, private bedrooms for visitors such as family, a commercial quality kitchen for regular meals and laundry facilities. Residents will decide together the final design of this building. Current projections (the common area structure design is a unit cost variable) for each home are estimated to be in the low to mid \$100k range. Wyar states he’s striving to keep costs reasonable.

Dr. Maureen Aaron, who is retired, has committed to a unit (a \$20,000 deposit is being requested to secure an owner occupied spot) and serves on the board leading the SpiritServ initiative (www.SpiritServCommunity.com). “I heard of SpiritServ three years ago,” she explains. “It was obviously in a very fledgling state then. It piqued my interest and curiosity, mainly because I’m 71, live alone, prefer to downsize

sooner rather than in a crisis situation and liked the idea of a community focused on supporting each other while serving others.”

To date, a suitable parcel has been identified, several initial residents have committed, a preliminary site plan has been developed, a modular home manufacturer has been sourced and the project has been put on City Council agendas.

The intended site, currently owned by the City at the former Countryside golf course, was included in the Roanoke’s 2010 masterplan. It is earmarked to be sold for mixed-residential development that includes ample walkways and open spaces. The current timeline projects residents start moving in by the end of 2017.

Dr. Aaron notes, “As a Catholic, I feel like one of the better ways to do the corporate as well as the spiritual work for mercy is by living in a community. When we’re isolated from each other, it’s hard. Because people are close together physically in what’s being proposed by the SpiritServ concept, the possibilities are much easier. It affords us greater opportunities to be a better person.

Senior co-housing affords us the opportunity to age gracefully with Grace.” Senior co-housing is a concept that’s getting some traction in the United States. Currently, there are an estimated 180 current co-housing developments with more being conceived each year, SpiritServ among them. With an aging population and retirees living more active lives into later years, many are starting to consider creative ways for happier and healthier faith-based retirement year solutions.

Romans 15:1 “We who are strong in faith should help the weak with their weaknesses and not please only ourselves”.