

Slowly, local developers embrace new land use ideas

By Mark Barrett  
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- Asheville - More Developers in Buncombe County have begun paying attention to the idea that people may want to use their feet for more than just walking between their home and their car.



There are still relatively few developments built strictly according to ideas about land use called "New Urbanism" or "Traditional Neighborhood Development." But a growing number of developments, like the mixed-use project Eastwood Village in Reynolds, employ at least some of the principles.

Communities built along a New Urbanism model often feature sidewalks, homes with front porches moved closer to the street and a variety of housing types designed to attract people of different ages and income levels.

The separation between residential and commercial land uses is less clear cut, streets often form a grid instead being laid out as a series of cul-de-sacs feeding a central artery and individual lots are frequently smaller to make way for a park or other common green space.

The benefits, according to backers, are neighborhoods that create a sense of community, reduce dependence on the automobile and create affordable housing.

Developers pick and choose which of these principles they think make sense for their project, meaning some projects in the area are something of a hybrid.

Developers "have had this assembly-line approach to development and Traditional Neighborhood Development takes time," said James Bannon, president of a local group promoting environmentally-sensitive development.

"There's definitely going to be a learning curve for developers because it's really going to be a break with what they've done for 40 or 50 years," he said.

Bannon, head of Smart Growth Partners of Western North Carolina, said he has been generally impressed with what he has seen of plans for Eastwood Village even though it does not conform to New Urbanism principles in every way.

"It will be better than 90 percent of the development that has happened over the past 10 or 20 years," Bannon said.

Eastwood Village won't have sidewalks in some areas, for instance, and some residential streets are cul-de-sacs.

Harry Pilos, whose Delphi Development is developing Eastwood Village, said traffic levels in the development will mean it will still be walkable and that the site's topography dictated the street layout.

"I'm all for smart growth if it's really smart growth. I'm not for it just as a buzzword," he said.

Eastwood Village is also constrained by what lies around it. A grocery store, drug store, two school and two other commercial buildings are all within walking distance. But most of those buildings lie on the other side of Charlotte Highway, soon to become five lanes, and there is no sidewalk connecting any of them.

Getting people to walk from Eastwood Village to other places in the area "is going to be tough" due to habit and lack of facilities, said Michael McDonough, an architect who has worked on Eastwood Village.

"You almost have to reprogram yourself to just walk instead of getting into the car to get everything," he said.

Pilos said he has begun discussions with county government and others with interest in the area and is preparing to approach the state Department of Transportation to see what can be done about making the area more pedestrian-friendly.

Other area projects that incorporate at least some New Urbanism principles include Cheshire on N.C. 9 south of Black Mountain, Artisan Park on Old Haywood Road in West Asheville, Straus Park on U.S. 64 in Brevard and Biltmore Park on Long Shoals Road in Skyland.

"The market's saying we want a choice. We have enough strip shopping centers or big boxes or suburban subdivisions," Bannon said.

In fact, Bannon said, the strength of demand means much of the housing in the developments is not particularly affordable.

"The prices have gotten astronomical because there's such a limited supply," he said.

"People are just sick of sitting in their cars for an hour or two a day and having to drive to do everything."