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Affordable housing project in question

Only one Montgomery County supervisor, Bill Brown, has expressed support for the project.

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By Tonia Moxley 381-1676

Questions and answers

- Read Blacksburg officials' response to Montgomery County Supervisors' concerns about an affordable housing project proposed for county land along Harding Avenue.

Map

- Proposed Harding Avenue affordable housing site

The future of a development proposal that could provide up to 185 low- and moderately priced homes for Montgomery County residents was far from assured Thursday as nonprofit development entity Community Housing Partners Inc. prepared for a second public meeting on the subject.

More than 200 interested people and residents living near the old Poff Farm property off Harding Avenue were invited to weigh in on a project proposed on that 27-acre parcel that would create what officials are calling "work force housing" for those meeting federal income guidelines.

But a majority of Montgomery County supervisors, who must sign off on the project for it to go forward, have so far given it a chilly reception.

If it's built, the new subdivision would be a joint project between Community Housing Partners and Blacksburg's Housing and Neighborhood Services Office, and would provide housing for families living on 80 percent or less of the median income. In Blacksburg, a family of four living on \$49,300 or less

could qualify.

Blacksburg officials describe the project as "work force housing," pointing out that it will allow teachers, janitors and police officers to live and work in Blacksburg. They often point to the town's police force as an example of workers priced out of the town's housing market. None of Blacksburg's 50-plus officers owns a home within town limits.

The preliminary concept for the Harding Avenue project would build various types and sizes of certified "green" housing on the property, and use the latest in technology to reduce storm water runoff and mitigate other environmental issues, officials have said. The town would also extend public water and sewer to the property and expand the Blacksburg Transit bus routes to the development, officials say.

The project would be developed by the Christiansburg-based Community Housing Partners and subsidized with \$5.5 million in federal affordable housing funds -- \$4 million would come from Blacksburg's annual Community Development Block Grant allocations and \$1.5 million would come from the New River Valley's joint HOME consortium funds, which are administered by Blacksburg.

But there's a hitch. For the project to go forward, the property must be brought into the town limits through a boundary adjustment, a legal process that requires public input and cooperation from the supervisors and the signature of a Montgomery County judge.

To date, only one supervisor, District E representative and retired Blacksburg Police Chief Bill Brown, has said he supports the project.

"I worked in that town for 36 years, and I know the difficulties of low- and moderate-income people owning homes in the town," Brown said. "People make the assumption that it's low-income and a lot of times associate crime with it, but that project's not about that."

Brown also pointed out that most Virginia Tech students would be ineligible to buy or rent homes in the project, a concern that some supervisors have voiced. He added that the project will not just benefit Blacksburg, however, because county residents may also apply to buy a home there.

District D Supervisor Jim Politis said Thursday, however, that he "will never vote for that, ever. I would never vote to spend taxpayer money to buy somebody else a house ... I don't believe in entitlements."

Supervisors John Muffo, Gary Creed and Doug Marrs could not be reached for comment. But at a recent supervisors meeting where town officials presented the project, Creed joined District F Supervisor Mary Biggs in questioning the ability of the school system, particularly Harding Avenue Elementary where Biggs has taught for 30 years, to absorb students from new development. Others cited increased traffic and the density of the project as possible negatives.

The county has over the past decade struggled to keep up with school building and other needs such as teacher pay. Biggs pointed out that property taxes on residential developments often fall short of paying

for the infrastructure needs they create, including new schools.

But, Biggs said of the Harding Avenue project, "I'm in the listening mode." She also wondered aloud whether the town would be willing to give something in exchange for the boundary adjustment that might make it more attractive to supervisors.

In January, the supervisors agreed to a boundary adjustment with Christiansburg that brought a large parcel of vacant commercial property along Franklin Street into the town limits at the request of developer Roger Woody. As part of the boundary adjustment, Christiansburg is working with the county to develop a revenue sharing agreement on meals and lodging taxes that may be generated if the property is developed.

Blacksburg and the county have for several years debated, sometimes in hostile tones, what to do with the 20-acre old Blacksburg Middle School property on South Main Street. County officials want to sell or lease that property for several million dollars that could be used to build new schools. But the town council has been reluctant to rezone it for the high-impact commercial uses that would fetch the most money.

Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Annette Perkins declined Thursday to take an official position on the Harding Avenue project. But, she said, "I know that my constituents are very much not in favor of it. I want more information ... and see where that leads us."

On Wednesday, the town sent a five-page letter to the county addressing many of the questions and concerns expressed by the supervisors, who are set to discuss the project at a meeting Monday.

Staff writer Donna Alvis-Banks contributed to this report.

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