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Editorial: Tweak Blacksburg's town line

Land on Harding Avenue is ideal for workforce housing.

Blacksburg wants to build much-needed workforce housing, but it needs some cooperation from Montgomery County. Unfortunately, three county supervisors might put personal grudges ahead of the common good and spike the project.

Even with the slumping real estate market nationally, homes in town remain expensive. Regular Janes and Joes cannot afford to live there. Police officers, teachers, nurses and other professionals must commute. Indeed, the last time we checked, only one Blacksburg police officer lived in town, and he rented.

The town is fighting that problem with help from federal grants that pay to renovate older properties and build new ones. For example, the grants helped build the Roanoke-Lee Street duplexes through a public-private partnership.

Now town officials have turned their eyes on the 26-acre Poff Farm. Located out Harding Avenue, it is well suited to workforce housing. It's within walking and biking distance of downtown; a bus line serves the area; and the street can handle the additional traffic.

Working with the same company that did the Roanoke-Lee Street development, the town would leverage about \$4 million worth of grants to build up to 185 rental and owner-occupied units. More than 30 percent of the land would remain open space.

Residents could earn up to 120 percent of the area's median income, but at least half would earn 80 percent or less. Median income is about \$61,600 for a family of four and \$43,100 for a single person.

Buyers would receive a subsidy, basically an interest-free loan repaid when they sell the property.

Income and owner-occupancy requirements would bar Virginia Tech students, and deed restrictions would ensure sales are to other workforce families.

It is a good project that would benefit the entire county, but there's a hitch: The land is outside the town limits. Blacksburg may only spend its \$4 million on projects in town. It therefore hopes the county will agree to shift the boundary a bit.

At least three county supervisors might stand in the way.

Supervisor Mary Biggs is a teacher at Harding Avenue Elementary. She worries the school cannot handle an influx of students. School administrators do not share that assessment and assure town planners there is enough room.

Biggs also wants the town to chip in money for schools, an idea she has floated before. For some reason she thinks Blacksburg residents should pay twice for schools. She forgets that they already pay county taxes like everyone else.

Then there is John Muffo, who is angry with the town because it would not extend sewer and water services to some of his constituents a couple of years ago.

"There needs to be a little quid pro quo here," he said at a recent county meeting, sounding more like a thug than an elected official. "If the town wants some cooperation from me, I hope the town will give some cooperation when I come to the town and ask for some help for other constituents who live 10 feet out of town."

That project, of course, has nothing to do with this one. If some of Muffo's constituents want town services, maybe he can facilitate another boundary line adjustment so they receive them -- and pay town taxes.

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The third supervisor, Jim Politis, just hates federal entitlement programs. "I'm not one who's for trying to help somebody buy a home, especially in today's market," he said.

Such a big heart. Blacksburg gets this money either way. The only question is whether it will use it to build workforce housing.

There are plenty of details to work out, such as where to build sidewalks and bike lanes, but there will be time to do that. At least there will be if county supervisors get over their personal issues and vote for the good of the community.

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