

Buxton struggles with cohousing project

By Gordon Lane

Reporter-American Journal

BUXTON (June 19, 2008): Last summer, while on retreat in southern France, Françoise Paradis decided that all the reading she had been doing about cooperative housing communities needed to become a reality for her. So, she began to design Greensward Hamlet, a so-called co-housing community, which would be an environmentally friendly development using geothermal, solar and wind energy, where people would live in a tight-knit group, share meals in a common house and grow some of their food together.

Despite the feel-good nature of the new community, which would start being built in Buxton later this year, residents so far are not convinced that 20 condominiums at the end of a dirt road off Route 117 is the right direction for the neighborhood or the town in general.

Paradis' project, which would include unpaved roads and walking trails on nearly 30 acres at the end of Marshall Lane, faced opposition from neighbors when it went before the Planning Board last week.

"What are we giving away in Buxton?" Mel Howards asked the Planning Board during a public hearing June 9 on the project. Howards questioned Paradis' stated concern for building a community, while at the same time developing land in Buxton and stepping on the toes of the community that already lives there.

Paradis' opponents have gone as far as accusing her of deceiving the Buxton Planning Board, reasoning that the cost of a fossil-fuel-free development as Paradis proposed is too expensive to ever become a reality. Despite residents with concerns about the impact of a large development on well water, traffic, or simply the long-standing way of life in Buxton, the Planning Board has so far voted that the project is meeting the general requirements to go forward.

"I was a little surprised," Paradis said, about the strength of opposition to her project voiced at the Planning Board meeting.

Paradis, who lives in Saco, is proposing to build five buildings with four condos in each, with a couple of attached, "in-law" apartments. And, perhaps most important for the style of the development, she also proposes a common house, where neighbors will be able to engage in community meals, meetings and activities.

The cohousing community is, according to Paradis, a decades-old living style developed first in Denmark. Many co-housing projects develop around a theme. Paradis' project — Greensward Hamlet — is focusing on sustainable living and a return to nature. The design includes harnessing energy from geothermal systems, solar panels and a small wind turbine called a Windspire. The geothermal design should keep any of the condo owners from having a heating bill.

Paradis hopes to be connected to “the grid” for electrical power, but expects that enough natural energy would be generated to power the development.

Paradis is working to get the entire project LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified by the U.S. Green Building Council.

“I think it is the way the world is going to go,” Susan King said about the sustainable nature of the project. King is a Gorham resident who has known Paradis for five years and participated in some focus groups Paradis organized to figure out what the cohousing community would look like. She isn't sure if she'll be able to purchase one of the condos, but she hopes to.

“The concept is out there, but what I find is that people don't really understand it,” King said.

There is one other co-housing community development in Maine, Two Echo Cohousing Community in Brunswick. Two other projects, one in Edgecomb and one in Gouldsboro, are also forming. There are some 900 projects across the country, but Paradis said only 113 are actually established.

At the Two Echo community in Brunswick, no cars are allowed up to where the houses wind around dirt paths. Gardens, trees, benches, picnic tables, and freshly chopped wood line the walkway.

With the sustainable approach to the project, Greensward Hamlet would likely attract people who are committed to gardening and cooking together, sharing community duties and being attuned to environmental issues. Smoking would be banned, alcohol discouraged, and carpooling and bicycling encouraged. The public would have access to some 18 acres of land webbed with hiking trails.

Despite all the planned outreach and environmental goals, residents are concerned about the effect the development would have on those who live on the small dirt road where it would be located.

Because of the new residents and increased traffic, the town would require that Marshall Lane would have to be built up and paved. Lucy Gorham said at the meeting she feared she wouldn't be able to access the land she owns on both sides of the road unless culverts were installed at Paradis' expense. But it was pointed out that even then, the only town requirement is that two access points be installed on each side of the road.

Pat and Paulette Langevin operate Angels Retreat Assisted Living from their home at 50 Marshall Lane. They said are afraid the paving of the road and increased traffic would mean their elderly residents would no longer be able to walk down the road. They bought the home from Paradis, who used to operate her psychological services practice there.

"When we bought it, we bought it for the privacy," said Paulette Langevin.

Next to the Langevins is Joyce Lurvey, who said she never had a problem with Paradis in the five years Paradis lived next to her, but she didn't like the project when it was first proposed. She's still concerned about the traffic impact of 20 condos, and about water levels. She also asked how much one of the new condos was going to cost. Paradis did not have concrete numbers, but said a one-bedroom unit might be around \$200,000.

However, for Howards, a neighbor though not an abutter, "the whole thing is a disaster." Despite the character of the development, it's still a development of previously undeveloped land, he said.

Paradis sees the access she is offering to the trails and the sustainable nature of her project as being good things for both communities – the one she's creating and neighbors.

Residents also said they were concerned that Paradis clear-cut her property in 2005. Paradis responded that she regrets the clear-cutting and that it had been her intent to remove only old growth to let new growth flourish. She said the loggers "massacred" the property.

The Planning Board was not in agreement last week on whether the project meets the basic requirements for site plan approval. Voting on the individual standards at their meeting last week, one member, David Anderson, thought the project could adversely affect property values. Because only four of the seven board members were at the meeting - two were absent and James Logan recused himself due to conflict of interest- if just one other member had voted as Anderson did, the whole project would have failed.

Board members also disagreed over whether there was adequate fire protection, which also almost caused the project to be rejected.

But the Planning Board, after over an hour of discussion, gave Paradis approval for the project on the conditions that Paradis creates a back-up water supply for fire crews and installs culverts so Lucy Gorham can access her property. Paradis also has to get approval by the Department of Environmental Protection, which held a public hearing on Tuesday. Paradis said that application should come through within the next two months.

Brunswick residents raised concerns similar to the citizens in Buxton when Two Echo was forming, according to Doug Benner. He can see Two Echo across his back yard, which slopes down and then backs up to where 26 homes are built, tightly knit around the common house.



Kaplan Thompson Architects' rendering of Greensward Hamlet, a cohousing project proposed in Buxton.

"Initially, I was quite opposed," Benner said. "It was undeveloped farmland. But realistically, we could have had houses every two acres."

"As far as development goes, I think it's pretty darn good," he said, noting that he would have preferred no development.

"Everything they do that might affect us, or impose on us, they keep us advised," he said. "It's a great place for kids."

As for the worst of it, "there's some traffic, but it hasn't been horrendous."

Paradis is hoping to start moving people into the new development by next spring. She said she has five commitments from individuals to buy condos already, and another five are strongly interested. She expects all the units would be bought within two years.

A Closer Look

Co-housing communities are essentially sub-developments designed to engage its residents in shared activities. Whether the development consists of detached homes or condominiums, the living spaces are built around a common house, where residents join together for meals, have community meetings and make decisions together on what should happen in the community. Community vegetable gardens are often a central piece of the development plan.

For more information, visit the Cohousing Association of the United States' Web site at www.cohousing.org.

For more information on Françoise Paradis' Buxton project, see www.greenswardhamlet.com.

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