

It takes a green village

Legacy Farm's co-housing community expects to be off-the-grid when finished

By Megan Labrise

Going green not within your means? You might just be able to buy with a little help from your friends.

One trend in residential building that's on the rise is cohousing, a cooperative living arrangement in which people cluster houses around a common building. They may share amenities, meals and more, depending on their determined needs as a community. They do share an ethos: Community planning is the secret ingredient in sustainability.

The dream of a green community will soon become a reality at Legacy Farm in Rosendale.

In April 2008, the project, also known as Ulster County Cohousing, received conditional final approval from the Rosendale Planning Board for 37 residential units on 56 acres off of Binnewater Road. The former farmland features a lake, meadows and woodlands, much of which will be preserved as open space thanks to a minimized development footprint.

"From my point of view — and our point of view — it's absolutely urgent that we go green in every way that we possibly can," said Linda Gluck, one of Legacy Farm's general managers.

The first phase of this build-out will include the common building and nine residential units, to be inhabited by Legacy Farm's founding shareholders. The group is currently petitioning the attorney general for approval to add the anticipated remaining units.

They have invested \$340,000 to date in a general fund. The projected two-year construction of the nine initial units and common house is expected to begin in Spring 2010.

These initial nine high-density homes — comparably small by yesterday's McMansion standards — will range from 900 to 1700 square feet. Most will be two story duplexes, with some single-family detached units available. All will feature elements of sustainable design, with the hope of eventually becoming zero-emission housing.

Parking will be consolidated, and a series of walking trails throughout the development will provide a child-safe, pedestrian environment. Energy-efficient buildings will be constructed of highly durable non-toxic materials, such as: low-volatile organic compound (VOC) finishes, fiber-cement siding, metal roofs, recycled insulation and polished concrete floors.

"The overall package is super-insulated," said Chuck Silver of Hudson River Design. "They also have heat-recovery ventilation...Everything is done with an eye toward green and indoor air quality."

Silver, who has over 30 years of green building experience, co-designed the Legacy Farm community with Bruce Coldham of Coldham & Hartman Architects of Amherst, Massachusetts. He is also the designer of Common Fire, the platinum LEED-certified housing co-op known as "the greenest building in the Northeast" in Tivoli, New York. Landscape architect and planner Walter Cudnohufsky, of Walter Cudnohufsky Associates, Inc., Ashfield, Massachusetts, also served as a project consultant.

"The core group [of Legacy Farm members] has been self-directed. They didn't hire a developer; they hired a design team. They're [involved] in project management; they found the

property; they've gone through the municipal process of approval. It's very impressive," said Silver.

No monthly utility bills

Once constructed, their energy-efficient units will surpass EPA Energy Star standards. The community will achieve close to 50 percent less energy use than code-built construction.

Small geothermal heat pumps in each unit will provide heat, hot water and air conditioning from a single device. This is coupled with tight building envelopes and photovoltaic panels. "[The panels] are part of the initial purchase price, sized to fully power the heat pump which produces all heat, hot water and air conditioning to the houses. Any optional increase in the size of the photovoltaic system would be to power lights, appliances, etc." said Silver.

Their inclusion will ultimately reduce fossil fuel consumption for heating, cooling and hot water to zero.

That means no monthly utility bills. "These buildings have, as part of their purchase price, their energy for heat, hot water and air conditioning included. By using renewable sources, there are no energy bills...when you buy a unit," said Silver. Instead, residents' modest portions of utility service purchase and maintenance are appended to their mortgage payments.

Clustering will also permit shared systems, such as sewer and water, to soften their impact on the land.

As green development goes, Legacy Farm was ahead of its time. "When we first starting dreaming about creating Legacy Farm Cohousing in 2002, our green and sustainable standard was less appreciated or understood," said Legacy Farm's other general manager Ellen Sribnick.

"After attending recent county events regarding local green and sustainable efforts, it is palpable and encouraging to witness that we are part of a movement toward this world wide agenda."

Cohousing originated in Denmark in the early 1970's. Stateside since 1988, it is now considered a promising solution to modern environmental and social concerns. There are currently over 150 cohousing communities in the United States And given our current economic and climatic circumstances, this just might be the best moment in history to pursue cohousing. There are important social benefits as well.

"There's a need for social resilience and cooperation," said Gluck. "People are hard-hit by the economic situation. During the [Great] Depression, there was a cohesive social fabric: extended families, an agrarian society, thriftiness. That resilience was a buffer for those people in that time. We don't have that now; everybody's on their own."

Cooperative intergenerational neighborhoods serve as a "planned community," which forms a sort of extended network of shared experiences and resources. Households reflect a cross-section of diverse ages and backgrounds: singles, couples and families with children. The ideal result is an ongoing connection to neighbors, forming a sort of extended family while maintaining one's personal space.

The larger community

In addition to providing a supportive community structure, Legacy Farm hopes to reach out and benefit the community at large. One possibility is the development of an organic community garden. The property, which was a pesticide-free farm for three generations, would easily lend itself to sustainable farming once more.

Also, the solar energy generated by Legacy Farm will be of use beyond its boundaries. "Almost all photovoltaic systems [including Legacy Farm's] feed power back to the grid. They do this whenever power is being generated and not fully used. They generate much more power in summer when the days are longer and they take power when needed, [more in winter than summer]. This arrangement is known as net metering. When a building has no annual energy bills for the year, it means that the solar array produces as much power as the building consumes in the year...net-zero energy use," said Silver.

Both state and federal governments are now catching on to sustainability, offering major incentives for green elements in residential design.

On the federal level, there are tax-credit incentives: 30 percent of purchase price for photovoltaic. The new administration has added further incentives for going green. "Now, in the new package, there's 30 percent for geothermal heat pumps, in addition to the photovoltaic credit. Both of those are fantastic incentives for building green," said Silver.

Legacy Farm has applied for two New York State Energy Research & Development Authority (NYSERDA) grants: Next Generation Emerging Technologies for Residential Buildings and Heating and Cooling Systems. The former, to be applied to "greening" the buildings, has been granted.

The green aspect is as important to potential residents as its founders, said Pasha Clarke, chairperson of the Legacy Farm membership committee.

"The type of person that cohousing attracts has a vision of creating a living space that's in tune with how they believe the world should be treated. It's all connected with what we believe and how we're treating our land. We're grateful to have this beautiful piece of property." 1

Legacy Farm holds monthly meetings; the public is welcome to attend. An informational meeting, silent auction, and potluck lunch will be held at the Canaltown Alley on Main Street in Rosendale (behind the Big Cheese) on Saturday, April 4. For more information, visit: <http://www.legacyfarmcohousing.com/>.