

# real estate news

## THE NEW FACE OF COHOUSING

BY CARRIE GRIFFIN BASAS

In a time of increasing suburban sprawl, many people are wondering how they can find more privacy and distance from their neighbors. However, not all people are on the same page. A growing number of individuals are considering housing alternatives, such as cohousing, where the focus is often on minimizing sprawl and maximizing a sense of community. Houses are placed closer together, common areas and green spaces are created, and neighbors make decisions about community policies through chosen communication channels. Some of these communities have environmental interests in mind, while others are simply looking for more affordable ways to live. One such project that combines both of these missions is in the works in Crozet, where friends and former strangers have come together to form Blue Ridge Cohousing (BRC).

Eleven area families have joined the cohousing group, without much marketing, yet. Some members, like Charles Twardy and his family, found BRC through a web search. Other members, such as writer Mara Rockcliff, have experience with cohousing living. Several neighbors-to-be lived at the Blacksburg cohousing community, Shadowlake Village, BRC's mentor in the project. Following Shadowlake's example, members will own their own homes and follow a consensus-driven model for resolving disputes and making decisions.

BRC has a contract on the land, contingent on the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors' approval of their rezoning application. They expect the Board's process to take six to nine months. After the process closes, the one-year building phase will begin. The current plan is for Community Housing Partners of Christiansburg (CHPC) to build 32 units: twelve houses of 1800 sq. ft., ten of 1300 sq. ft., and ten of 900 sq. ft. The design includes duplexes and town homes built around central common spaces, with a large portion of the six acres and stream preserved. The group needs to sell all of the homes before construction is completed.

CHPC is a nonprofit builder, focusing on three kinds of sustainability – economic, environmental, and social. The builder actively searches for grant opportunities and other funding to make units in their developments more affordable for all homeowners. For example, BRC is working with CHPC to keep the unit costs between \$175,000 and \$385,000. By using eco-friendly, energy-efficient building practices and materials, they plan to keep down maintenance and operating costs.

So far, the cohousing members come from various walks of life – professors, artists, counselors, policy consultants, technical entrepreneurs, and stay-at-home parents. Some of them are single, while others have several children. According to Rosemary Gould, a Charlottesville resident and a member of the group, "The only people cohousing is not appropriate for are those who don't want to get to know their neighbors or spend much time with them." The community members are striving to create a mix of people in all senses.

Future BRC neighbors hope to use the existing farmhouse and swimming pool on the land to serve as community hubs. Plans are in the works for a large meeting space and a restaurant-style common kitchen. Each home will have its own kitchen, but the central cooking space allows for some shared weekly meals and more elaborate gatherings.

As BRC member Elizabeth Hoover puts it, "Our culture has us doing so many things by ourselves – shopping, driving, childcare, leisure. I look forward to cohousing because it creates opportunities for working together and making life simpler. And that leaves more time for the fun stuff."

Cohousing of the 21st century has changed and grown from 1960s models that might be familiar to some readers. More than 100 successful cohousing communities now exist in the United States. BRC is forward-thinking in striking the balance between conservation and development, community and privacy, but it also preserves or restores older ideas about what makes neighborhoods thrive. By focusing on how different people can live in close proximity to one another in positive and supportive ways, BRC embraces its strongest asset – its members.

Members are not even drawn to cohousing for the same reasons. Some members look forward to sharing babysitting responsibilities, while others are looking forward to quiet and pedestrian-friendly lifestyles. The structure and relationships are intended to be collaborative, supportive and respectful – with some rules and consensus decision-making procedures to maintain positive dynamics. In these ways, cohousing has preserved some of its strengths from the past, but it has also found broader appeal as a more mainstream idea of how to live.

Learning more about BRC's plans is straightforward. The group maintains a website at <http://www.blueridgecohousing.org/index.html>. They hold a social gathering every first Saturday of the month, and these events serve as opportunities to get to know the existing members as well as the plans for the site. Business meetings are held on the third Saturday of every month. Various levels of involvement exist – from full equity membership to exploratory interest. Space is still available. For more information about BRC's plans, visit their website or find them at their table at the City Market each Saturday. They will also be hosting a table at the Earth Day Festival on April 28th in McIntire Park (West), from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m.



The plan for Blue Ridge Cohousing is to build 32 units: twelve houses of 1800 sq. ft., ten of 1300 sq. ft., and ten of 900 sq. ft. Photo by Elizabeth Hoover.

The New Face of Cohousing  
By Carrie Griffin Basas  
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In a time of increasing suburban sprawl, many people are wondering how they can find more privacy and distance from their neighbors. However, not all people are on the same page. A growing number of individuals are considering housing alternatives, such as cohousing, where the focus is often on minimizing sprawl and maximizing a sense of community. Houses are placed closer together, common area and green spaces are created, and neighbors make decisions about community policies through chosen communication channels. Some of these communities have environmental interests in mind, while others are simply looking for more affordable ways to live. One such project that combines both of these missions is in the works in Crozet, where friends and former strangers have come together to form Blue Ridge Cohousing (BRC).

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