

COVER STORY: Affordable housing plan targets underused Asheville area
Project could spur riverfront growth

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ASHEVILLE - When RiverLink Executive Director Karen Cragolin shows people around the most urbanized portion of Asheville's section of the French Broad River, the same question always comes up, she says.

"When can I live there?"

Plans being prepared by a local nonprofit might provide an answer.

Mountain Housing Opportunities plans to spend \$15 million to locate 85 or more apartments on Depot Street and renovate the old Glen Rock Hotel building on the same site for 20 to 25 condominiums over the next two to three years.

The project would be one of the largest infusions of private funds into the riverfront area in recent memory and could be a catalyst for additional development activity.

It would also be a significant new source of affordable housing near downtown.

The project would provide housing at several different price points, but many units would be designed to be affordable to low- or moderate-income families, said MHO's project manager, Cindy Weeks.

RiverLink, city government and others have for years been trying to encourage investment in the area on the east side of the river and generally south of Smoky Park Bridge, which carries Interstate 240 across the French Broad.

RiverLink has had plans developed calling for hundreds of new housing units along the river along with greenway paths for walking and bicycling.

Private investment has come bit by bit, however, and last September's floods may have an impact on land uses in the area. Artists and craftsmen have moved into several older buildings in the area, and a few others are being renovated for living space or studios, but there are still large tracts of vacant land and a number of empty buildings.

The level of activity is still a good bit less than riverfront boosters might hope. When a tractor-trailer backing into Dave Steel blocked the five-way intersection of Depot Street, Clingman Avenue



photo: Ewart Ball/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Mountain Housing Opportunities' Cindy Weeks stands in front of the old Glen Rock Hotel on Depot Street in central Asheville. Mountain Housing plans to build apartments behind the building and convert the Glen Rock into condominiums.

The Glen Rock Hotel opened in February 1890 across Depot Street from the city's main passenger railroad terminal. A contemporary account described the building as a "large, three-story frame building in Queen Anne style" with "finish and equipment ... first-class in every particular." It was, the account says, "by no means merely a wayside inn."

A 1929 news story said the hotel building on the site at the time had been condemned and would be replaced by a 75-room structure, which still stands. The hotel was at one time a favorite of railroad workers and saw a variety of uses in more recent times.

and other streets for a couple of minutes on a recent afternoon, only one vehicle had to wait to pass.

It wasn't always that way. The city's principal train depot used to be across Depot Street from the project site, and old photographs and documents show dozens of businesses in the area.

"It was a pretty happening place at one time," Weeks said.

Near downtown

Mountain Housing has an option on 2.1 acres at the corner of Depot and Ralph streets that includes the Glen Rock Hotel building. City Council is scheduled to hear Mountain Housing's request that the property be rezoned from commercial/industrial to the city's new "urban place" zoning on April 12.

Mountain Housing's plans show a new, brick building with three levels of residential space and one of office and retail space wrapped around a parking garage.

The new building, which Weeks said is designed to be reminiscent of the "warehouse look" of several existing structures in the area, would go on land that is vacant except for a couple of run-down structures. It would contain roughly 85 apartments and 25,000 square feet of commercial space plus some space for community activities.

Work on that building would start in spring 2006 and take a year to 18 months, Weeks said.

Plans show landscaping around a small stream popularly known as Nasty Branch that drains much of the area south of downtown, a children's play area in a courtyard and a grassy "green" roof on part of the building.

The Glen Rock Hotel building, which has sat unused for several years, would be renovated into 20 to 25 condominiums. Work on it would likely start six months to a year after the start of construction of the new building, she said. The Asheville Packing building at 362 Depot St., also part of the tract Mountain Housing would buy, will remain as is, Weeks said.

The property is outside the 100-year flood plain. When the remnants of hurricanes Frances and Ivan came to town last September, "we went down there just about every day" and didn't see any flooding of the property, Weeks said.

Mountain Housing's primary mission is to provide or preserve affordable housing in one of the state's least affordable housing markets. The average price of an existing home sold in the Asheville area last year was 15 percent above the state average, according to the N.C. Board of Realtors. But the average wage per job in Buncombe County was more than 10 percent below the state figure in 2003 - the most recent year for which statistics are available.

Financing plans are still being worked out, but Weeks said they will likely include some tax credits for affordable housing as well as private financing.

The organization has been looking at land near downtown as a good place for affordable housing because "so many people work downtown and they don't work at high-wage jobs," Weeks said.

Mountain Housing completed Merritt Park, a condominium complex with a mix of subsidized and market-rate units at the corner of Clingman and Hilliard avenues, in 2002. Work on Prospect Terrace, a development of affordable single-family homes a block or so down Clingman from Merritt Park, is going on now. Mountain Housing hopes to break ground soon on a 50-unit apartment complex on Grove Street on downtown's western edge.

New neighbors

Units on Depot Street won't command the same prices as luxury condominiums downtown have drawn, but Weeks said some residents will likely live near the river because they are looking for an unusual, urban atmosphere.

Cragolin said parts of several buildings in the area have already been converted into living space and there are a few projects going on in the area to renovate other buildings for residential or commercial use.

"There's a huge demand for living space on the river. Anyplace you can live on the river, people are," she said.

Keith Green, whose family owns and operates Green's Mini-Mart near the Mountain Housing site, said the additional activity in the neighborhood and additional housing in particular will be welcome.

"I'm very proud of the fact that someone is investing in this community. ... It'll help people around here," he said. "They'll have the opportunity to move into housing that is not 'government assistance.' "

John Payne, who owns a building used for artist's studios nearby on Roberts Street, said the neighborhood would benefit from more residents.

"It'll bring the neighborhood back to life," he said. "It'll bring in lots of people."

Having more residents with eyes on the street will also reduce "sporadic petty crime," he said. If residents see something bad going on, "All they have to do is lean out the window with a cell phone and say, 'Hey!' " Payne said.

Stephen Keull is renovating an old building across the street from the Mountain Housing site for use by artists or others after closing his photographic business there.

When he bought the property several years ago, "It was kind of lonely."

That's already changing and time may bring even more activity, he said: "I don't think Asheville has too much clear space left."

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The first Glen Rock Hotel building, since demolished, shown in an old postcard with trolley cars in front.

Ewart Ball/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Stephen Keull is converting a building he owns at 375 Depot St. into spaces for artists - like this second-story space for art classes - and others. Apartments and condominiums across the street would only make the area more attractive, he said.