

Group hashes over plans for new co-housing community in Amherst or Northampton

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AMHERST — A group of baby boomers is discussing the creation of a new cohousing community that would be built to meet their needs as they get older.

“We want to approach aging differently; we don’t want to do it as our parents did,” said organizer Dyan Wiley, 60, who lives at Pioneer Valley Cohousing in North Amherst. “We’re asking questions like: How do I want to age and die well? How can I give back to the community? How can I have a spiritual life?”

Thirteen people came together last Sunday to get the discussion started. The group plans to meet again Jan. 13 from 2 to 5 p.m. at the common house of Pioneer Valley Cohousing on Pulpit Hill Road, and Wiley said that new people are welcome to attend.

Wiley has begun to investigate possible sites for the development, including Village Hill in Northampton and sites in Amherst and Greenfield, she said. She also plans to look at abandoned school buildings.

There are 16 cohousing communities in Massachusetts, Wiley said. They typically have clustered housing and open space, common areas such as gardens, and include some common meals, she said. Most have energy-efficient construction.

But creation of a new cohousing community is a challenging project, and groups seeking to do it have formed and fallen apart, she said. The concept is not for everyone, as it requires a financial investment that usually comes from having owned a home elsewhere, she said.

“You’re buying a house, but you’re also buying into a community,” she said. “If you have no resources, that’s very hard to do.”

At Pioneer Valley Cohousing, the smallest units sell for between \$225,000 and \$260,000, Wiley said. Built about 20 years ago on 27 acres, with small houses clustered on five acres, the community has 35 units, with each person owning his or her unit in a condominium arrangement.

The concept of cohousing may seem innovative, but actually people have lived in cooperative villages for thousands of years and the nuclear family is a more recent lifestyle, Wiley said. She’s detected a hunger among baby boomers for living in a community as they age, she said.

The development Wiley envisions would not resemble a subdivision. The group would be involved in designing it from the beginning, she said, and architects Laura Fitch and Mary Kraus, who also live in Pioneer Valley Cohousing, have expressed interest in being involved.

But the group that met last Sunday is still in the early stages, and represented different interests. While Wiley is primarily focused on senior cohousing, Gordon Kramer, 61, of Amherst is interested in environmental sustainability and a mutually supportive lifestyle, with the inclusion of a broader range of buy-in costs. He formed an online group of interested people.

“This is something the Earth needs from us, and this is what we need from each other,” he said at Sunday’s meeting.

Many of those at the meeting said they are interested in a multi-generational cohousing community rather than one that is limited to seniors.

Johanna Hall of Shutesbury said she wouldn’t want to live just with other seniors. Claire Siska of Acton said that as baby boomers age, many don’t have the same physical abilities, and she would like to consider some kind of hybrid plan.

At the same time, Siska said she wants to stay active and mentally alert and learn new things. Wiley said that baby boomers can expect to live longer and healthier lives than their parents, and cohousing provides them with social interaction that lowers the risk of dementia. She said she’s open to a multi-generational cohousing plan with an emphasis on seniors.

“The group has to discuss how that translates in lifestyle and priorities,” she said. “Can you hold onto what seniors need and have a neighborhood that is child-friendly? Can those ideas coexist? We haven’t answered that. It’s a fascinating discussion we’ll have.”

There are eight senior cohousing communities around the United States. Communities in Colorado and California are able to combine senior living and multi-generational living in separate but nearby sections, Wiley said.

The concepts are not mutually exclusive, but the group needs to decide what it wants as founding principles, find out what’s available in land or abandoned buildings, and what’s practical, she said. Susan Levine of Montague said that although she liked what she saw of Pioneer Valley Cohousing, she’d prefer a site closer to a population center.

Wiley is planning to lead a 10-session workshop on successful aging starting soon, at a time and place yet to be determined. It will focus not only on cohousing but also aging in place, the economics of getting older, staying healthy and spirituality.

It isn’t exactly clear what the definition of “senior” is, Wiley said. She quoted cohousing expert Charles Durrett, who jokingly said a senior is “a person who is 10 years older than you are.”