

Pipeline to the future

By Jay Conley
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The main road in Bedford County that beats a rustic path to Smith Mountain Lake soon will change forever.

"I really don't think people realize what's going to happen down there," Bedford County Administrator Kathleen Guzi said.

Virginia 122, a north-south connector splits the county in half from Big Island to Moneta amid pastoral views of farmland and the Blue Ridge Mountains. For years, county officials have earmarked the two-lane road as a main corridor not just for traffic but as an avenue for public water and sewer lines.

While the entire project won't be completed for at least 20-years, the first leg gets underway this summer when the Bedford County Public Service Authority begins construction of the Moneta Wastewater Treatment Plant. It will serve a three-mile stretch of Virginia 122 south from Virginia 608 to Hales Ford Bridge.

Although widespread residential development has already spread along the lake's shoreline over the past four decades, county planners, developers, and land prospectors say the sewage treatment plant will create an unprecedented wave of commercial and residential development near the lake.

"People in Roanoke take it for granted," said Vicki Gardner, executive director of the Smith Mountain Lake Chamber of Commerce, about the presence of public utilities. "But the lack of it thus far has limited the types of businesses that will locate in Bedford County. Up until now, it's been a stumbling block for developers."

County officials and developers say large-scale chain restaurants, grocery stores, and retailers – which not only provide goods and services, but also would add much-needed tax revenue – won't locate in places without public utilities.

Public water lines were installed along Virginia 122 last year. When the sewage treatment plant becomes operational late next year or early 2007, it's expected to turn farmland into pricey commercial property.

Guzi expects a steady stream of building permits to be filed. "I think in that first six months we're going to get bombarded," Guzi said.

Developers have already started several residential projects and a large commercial project, Downtown Moneta at Smith Mountain Lake, in anticipation of the plant.

Led by Thaxton businessman, George Aznavorian, a handful of developers agreed to contribute about \$2 million to the county's PSA to speed up construction of the \$10.2 million treatment plant.

Along with the initial flurry of activity when the plant opens, Guzi expects a dramatic surge of economic development to come about a year later, when a second wave of developers tries to capitalize on the appeal of lake recreational and tourism qualities. By then, the county should have a comprehensive plan in place to manage the growth.

"I think it's a good thing as long as we're prepared for it," said Chuck Neudorfer, who represents the Moneta District of the Bedford County Board of Supervisors. "It's a challenge, but it ought to be interesting."

When the county officials review the developments, Guzi wants them to see an area with appealing, harmonious storefront facades and business entrances designed to preserve traffic flow.

Aznavorian envisions a planned community anchored at the intersection of Virginia 608 and Virginia 122 on about 100 acres of land, with homes, businesses, restaurants, and medical facilities, all within walking distance.

On one side of Virginia 122 will be Mayberry Hills, where Aznavorian plans to build 300 single-family homes and townhomes. The project will feature houses with front porches, sidewalks, streetlights, and grassy areas where children can play. Across 122 will be Downtown Moneta at Smith Mountain Lake; a coffee shop, furniture store, branch bank, and cardiac imaging center already have signed letters of intent to set up shop in the commercial hub.

"The key to Aznavorian's plan is to attract a medical facility and possibly a continuing care facility," said Jody Lyons, of Lyons Team Realtors. "We've had some great meetings with a retirement village," he said.

The houses will range in price from \$175,000 to \$275,000 in Phase One. In comparison, lakefront lots are selling for \$300,00 to over \$1 million without a home.

"We're looking for that element of people who want to be close to everything, but don't want to be on the water," Aznavorian said.

About 40 people have reserved spaces for homes in the community, and about two-thirds of those people live on or near the lake.

"They can sell their homes, come to our neighborhood and bank the difference," Aznavorian said.

Mayberry Hills is for people of all ages. Whether you are 20 or 120, a young professional, a family with children, empty nesters, or retirees, Mayberry Hills has something for everyone.

As for other services, The Moneta Rescue Squad is less than a mile away, and a satellite office for the county's sheriff's office will be in the project's welcome center.

"It's not going to cost the county a dime, and we'll have the presence of the sheriff's department in our community, so it's a win-win situation," Aznavorian said.

The Moneta Sewage Treatment Plant will be built on land donated by Aznavorian on Virginia 608. The plant will have an initial capacity of 500,000 gallons of sewage per day, and can be upgraded to a 1.5 million capacity to accommodate growth in the area.

Lake-area residents expressed concern about the potential traffic congestion from a commercial sprawl.

Aznavorian said his project will do just the opposite.

"It's totally different than an urban sprawl where you're forced to get in your car and go anywhere," he said. "We're promoting pedestrian traffic."

"As for growth at the lake", Gardner said, "It's going to keep happening. Change is constant. There's no stopping change," she said. "Thankfully, this is happening in a very positive way."

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