



Workers with Christopolous & Kennedy General Contractors lay foundations for townhouses at Grove Parks Commons, which recently won an award from the American Planning Association's Tennessee chapter for Outstanding Green Community.

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Oak Ridge community plan wins green award

BY LARISA BRASS
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The recent recipient of a state planning award for outstanding green community wouldn't have been if developers had stuck with the original design for the Oak Ridge subdivision.

The drawings featured homes arranged side-by-side to fit the most homes as possible on the 110-acre hillside property, said Walter Wise, a Knoxville developer and partner in Groves Park Commons.

"I said, 'Who would want to live in this jammed in place?' We said, when you come out of your front door, every home has to feel special. When you come in you want a sense of arrival," he says.

In fact, Wise talks a lot less about the technical aspects of the green development than he does the quality of life he hopes to encourage with walking trails, open spaces, a pavilion and eventual retail shops. A video promoting the community shows tree-lined streets, river rock and lots of people outdoors.

"It's not designed around automo-

GROVES PARK COMMONS

What: Traditional neighborhood development in Oak Ridge featuring 325 homes built over three phases

Development team: Walter Wise, Bill Kennedy, Christos Christopolous and Terry Wheeler

Design: Barge Waggoner Sumner & Cannon; Brewer Ingram Fuller Architects

Builders: Mike Stevens Homes, Christopolous & Kennedy General Contractors

Honor: Outstanding Green Community, American Planning Association's Tennessee chapter

biles," Wise says. "It's designed for people."

In bestowing the honor, the American Planning Association's Tennessee chapter cited the project's "macro-green planning approach that focuses on an overall mixed-use development and the land plan's conservation ap-

proach"

Specifically, the organization mentioned "the use of recycled materials, inverted rooflines, bioswales and open space. The Committee recognizes Groves Park Commons for being a true conservation development that also utilizes new urbanism design principles. The development shows that conservation development can work, the numbers can work, and a development such as this can be approved."

Planning for the project began a couple of years ago, before green had become the buzzword, locally anyway, Wise says.

"With thousands of workers at the Department of Energy and related entities commuting to and from Oak Ridge each day, Wise spied opportunity and the greenest aspect of the project, the opportunity for residents to live, work, shop and play without burning lots of gasoline.

While green construction has garnered much attention, planning green communities has been slower to take hold, particularly in this part of the

country, says Daniel Boutte, a landscape architect with Barge Waggoner Sumner & Cannon, which created the development plan.

"It's like economy of scale," he said. "Your positive environmental efforts are going to be much better utilized on a larger scale."

For instance, rather than the traditional drain and ditch system for water runoff, Groves Park Commons will incorporate the site's natural features and landscaping to catch and filter water. Existing ponds will be enlarged and a lowland wet-weather stream and wetland area preserved. Walking trails will connect the community to an adjacent city park.

The development's location also scores it green points by reusing the former South Hills Golf Course. Shopping and other amenities are about a mile away.

Most developers view natural features as impediments when seeking to densely populate a piece of property with homes, but "we turned those physical features into assets rather than liabilities," Wise said.

The U.S. Green Building Council is creating standards under its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design system for housing developments, Boutte said. Groves Park Commons should qualify, he said, adding Barge Waggoner developed its own using similar projects and the nascent LEED initiative as guides.

The green theme will extend to the homes themselves, with the townhouses Energy Star rated. Developers are also experimenting with LED fixtures and outlets for plug-in electric vehicles.

The 325-home development will be built over three phases. Site preparation for the project's first phase, aiming at 100 homes, is nearly complete. Two cottage-style homes are currently under construction to be followed by nine townhouse units.

Wise discounts the troubled economy's impact on the project, noting the developers are on solid financial footing and already receiving inquiries. Plus, the recession is pushing down the cost of materials, he notes.

Boutte believes Groves Park Commons will be just the first of numerous green communities in the years ahead.

"Unfortunately, I have to say Tennessee is a little bit behind. This is something that's been going on out west for quite a while, and it's making its way here," he says. "It's just a matter of time before Tennessee and the rest of the country catch on to this way of development, this trend."



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