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Baby boomers head for the hills

Upstate developers target aging market

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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FOR THE JOURNAL

An aerial view representation of the proposed Pointe West development is shown.

Like a warm fleece blanket on a cold, rainy night in the Upstate, an army of baby boomers is finding comfort snuggly wrapped up inside the boundaries of Oconee and Pickens counties.

And much of that comfort is being designed by a contingent of savvy developers intent on not missing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

With a rapidly growing population of aging residents, Oconee and Pickens county developers are jumping at the opportunity to provide safe and secure havens where seniors can enjoy the golden years of their lives.

In South Carolina, the population has grown from 286,272 people age 60 and above in 1970 to 651,482 in 2000. That's a 128 percent increase in 30 years. The population of those 60 and older is projected to increase to 1,450,487 by the year 2030, another 123 percent increase from 2000, according to the South Carolina census report.

"And they are going to keep coming to the Upstate," said John Powell of Powell Real Estate.

Because of this anticipated increase of retirees settling in Oconee and Pickens, a trend is starting in the form of intergenerational residential developments.

Most notably, the Pointe West and Keowee River developments have been designed to include a three-tier plan for extended living and care.

Tom Winkopp, developer of Pointe West, already has a company lined up and under contract to run a retirement village, equipped with independent assisted living, an Alzheimer's wing and a nursing facility.

The entire development, however, will include waterfront lots for single-family homes and townhouses.

"This will be across from High Pointe, so we are really looking to round out a multigenerational atmosphere," he said, referring to a phase one development aimed at college-age inhabitants. "Let's face it, there are nearly 50,000 Clemson alumni that are aged 40 and older. A lot of them

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want to come back, and a lot of them want the care they will need as they continue to get older. This would provide that hands down."

When it comes to the prevalence of the all-inclusive developments, Powell said it's all relative.

"Look back a few decades ago," Powell said. "No one was familiar with the concept of something like Keowee Key. But, look how that took off. Our baby boomers want to settle in a place that has four seasons, low taxes, good people and a place where they can feel secure — healthwise and safetywise. These developments provide that, with a classy touch that many of them want."

Winkopp added that while both his developments will span the next 15 or 20 years, he hopes to start the infrastructure phase of Pointe West this coming spring.

"About 15 years ago, I looked at the retirement facility at Clemson Downs and thought there is going to be more and more of a demand for facilities like this," he said. "The feedback from people across the board has been extremely positive, but we still need the support of the county to really get going."

IN THE WORKS

In August a group of local investors unveiled plans for a $200 million planned community to be developed over the next 18-20 years, on 774 acres just north of Seneca.

Developer Scott Vick said Keowee River will be built in phases and will include a blend of residential, retail, restaurants, commercial office space and entertainment venues, all involving the use of extensive green spaces, with a particular focus on eco-adventure tourism.

However, the first phase also includes a similar tiered development for senior citizens and retirees, complete with planned doctors office and medical facilities. Vick said there would be independent, assisted and memory care living options.

Infrastructure work is expected to begin this fall with a grand opening in spring 2010.

UP AND RUNNING

An existing example of this kind of development, on a smaller scale, is Belvedere Commons, formerly Benton Village, in Seneca.

Like Keowee River and Pointe West, the community also has a three-tiered structure.

Stephen Bell, life enrichment director, said residents really enjoy all of the choices.

"You have your town homes for those who enjoy the independence," he said. "Even when it comes to our residents moving inside and needing more assistance, they aren't in a facility ... it's a community. Many of them want to live in a place like this. It takes the pressure off of them and their children. Plus, they have fun here with people their age."

There are now 75 million baby boomers between the ages of 45 and 63, and the Upstate may become the future home for many. Whether it's independent living or assisted living they are looking for, the pristine Golden Corner is expected to be a popular choice for retirement living, according to local officials and developers who are banking on that growth.

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Residents at Belvedere Commons in Seneca meet for lunch in the dining room on a recent afternoon.