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Owners of Loch Lyme Lodge hope to convert the property to a cohousing project.

(Valley News — Jennifer Hauck)

Partners in Lyme Project Envision A Community-Based Way to Live

By Warren Johnston

Valley News Staff Writer

The new owners of Loch Lyme Lodge have a dream. They see themselves living on a pond in a bucolic community surrounded by gardens and fruit trees, with a group of friends, family and interesting people.

They envision regular gatherings and evening meals with stimulating conversations and much laughter. They also see community involvement through a theater, restaurant, shared meals and activities. They want the sort of place that's comfortable for weddings and family reunions.

When they bought the 100-year-old cape-style lodge with its 21 cabins, barn and 120 acres of fields and woodlands overlooking Post Pond in Lyme, they knew if they were creative, they could make the dream happen without spoiling the land

or changing one of the cornerstones of the town, said Thetford resident Liz Ryan Cole, one of the group of owners of the property.

It would have been easy to subdivide the property and give each owner a piece on which to build a home. Current zoning allows that, but subdividing would have irrevocably changed the property, Cole said

“Right now, we can subdivide the property and build McMansions on it if we want to, but that's not what we want or what would be good for the property or for Lyme,” she said.

The plan is to build an environmentally green building tucked away out of sight, that would accommodate 18 condominium suites varying in size from 800 to 1,200 square feet. The building also would have community rooms, a main kitchen and dining area. Condo owners also would own a share of the rest of the property. The lodge and its restaurant would be open to summer guests, and revenue would help reduce the cost of maintaining the property, Cole said.

The concept is called “cohousing,” an idea that started in Denmark and spread to the United States in the early 1980s. The movement defines cohousing as a form of intentional neighborhood. There now are 120 established co-housing communities in the United States, including Cobb Hill in Hartland, Cole said.

All cohousing communities require that participants take part in the planning and design of the community and the homes. Residents manage and maintain the property, just as one would a home. There's no hierarchical structure, and no one person has authority over another. The leadership roles are in areas where people have skills and expertise, according to the Web site of the Cohousing Association of the U.S.

Cohousing communities range in size from seven to 67 residences and most fall into the range of 20 to 40 households. There are always common facilities for such daily activities as meals, daycare, children's playrooms, adult reading, workshops, libraries and gardens.

“In a cohousing community, you know who lives six houses down because you eat common meals with them, decide how to allocate homeowners' dues and gratefully accept a ride from them when your car's in the shop...” the association Web site says.

“There are some real advantages to cohousing,” said Anne Duncan Cooley, executive director, Upper Valley Housing Coalition. “It's a way to conserve a bigger piece of land in a way that is affordable. I think it's something that we are going to be looking at in the future (in the Upper Valley). We're going to have to learn more about it.”

Another effort to provide social supports for seniors while preserving a larger piece of land is under way in Thetford. “We're not really trying to do cohousing,

but what we're calling an intentional community with mutual support as seniors age," said Deb Jones, who along with her husband, Jack, and business partner, Gladys Sullivan, are developing the project. They want to build eight new clustered, discreet units on 118 acres on Garey Road. The small units would be out of sight of the road and behind a two-acre pond. Under the plan, a 103-year-old house would be preserved and the land would be maintained by the residents, who would own their units as well as a share of the entire property. Initially, there would be no common area, but residents could decide later whether to have one, Jones said.

The community at Loch Lyme would be organic, Cole said, and would consist of older people -- many of whom went to college together or have become friends in the Upper Valley -- as well as young families, singles and couples. Financial situations also would vary, she said.

Each resident would be required to work on the property for four hours a week, and there would be a common meal every day, which would be open to the outside community.

Currently, Loch Lyme Lodge offers rustic vacations with simple furnishings, no telephones or televisions. There are no video arcades, microwave ovens or a bar with nightly entertainment. There are clay tennis courts, walking paths and skiing and hiking trails and cabins with fireplaces.

There is a restaurant that's open in the summer months to the public as well as guests for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Chef Ron Perry specializes in using locally grown food, Cole said.

The cohousing aspect of the lodge, called the Pinnacle Project, will be tiered. The Tier One level is a shared ownership in the overall property and carries with it free out-of-season use of the facilities and free cabins as well as other amenities.

There will be 50 Tier One members who pay \$50,000 for a share of the property. Seventeen have signed up already. The Tier One owners also would be offered a chance to purchase one of the 18 suites in the new building either on a full-time or part-time basis. The units will range from \$175,000 to \$300,000, the Pinnacle Web site says.

In order for the property to remain intact and the cohousing units to be built, Lyme's zoning ordinance would have to be changed. Loch Lyme's owners hope that residents will see the change as a benefit to the town, Cole said.

"We are part of the community now, and we want to remain part of Lyme. This will give us, and others in the community, the opportunity to stay here, as we grow older. I hope it will be something that the town will support."

The owners of Loch Lyme Lodge feel a sense of obligation to the town, the property and the guests whose families have been visiting the lodge for

generations, Cole said.

“We feel like we've adopted Loch Lyme Lodge, and we adopted the guests and 100 years of history. For our part, we want to preserve what we've adopted and maintain the environmental quality of the community.”

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