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Will pocket neighborhoods take root in Manzanita?

Planning commission listens to details of a plan that calls for 23 cottages oriented around shared common areas

By Dave Fisher  
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It's the kind of development that seems to be a perfect fit for Manzanita – a planned “pocket neighborhood” that affords neighbors the opportunity to get to know each other and fosters a strong sense of community through design. While the concept isn't new, it is new to Manzanita and Jim Pence, of Manzanita Investment Properties, LLC, along with architect Ross Chapin, hope to make it a reality for the north Oregon coast community.

Pence purchased property at the northeast corner of Classic St. (Ted Erickson Way) and Dorcas Lane in 2006 and developed 15 lots for future development. “My thought was to build a combination of duplexes or maybe 30 or 40 condominiums units,” Pence said in a letter accompanying documents for the August Manzanita Planning Commission meeting.

With a changing market and downturn in the economy, Pence held off and began looking at other options, acknowledging that he wasn't a “condo type of guy.” Ultimately, his research led him to the pocket neighborhoods that Ross Chapin Architects, a Washington firm, had been designing. “I visited Ross's project in White Salmon, Washington near Hood River that was completed in 2007...I just loved it,” Pence told the commissioners. An approved subdivision, the infrastructure – water, sewer, roads and electrical – was already in place at Pence's Manzanita property. Chapin's challenge was to take what was there and come up with a modified design for a pocket neighborhood. The result is a planned development of 23 cottage homes gathered around shared community green spaces. Parking is clustered off to the side, a design feature that encourages residents to walk through the commons helping promote the community “feel.” Each cottage, anywhere from 720 to 1,600 square feet, has its own private yard, surrounded by a low fence.

Chapin, who lives on Whidbey Island in Washington, knows a thing or two about pocket neighborhoods, having designed a half dozen in the Pacific Northwest alone and elsewhere, including developments in Indiana and Massachusetts. He even wrote a book, *Pocket Neighborhoods: Creating Small Scale Community in a Large Scale World*, on the subject.

“In a pocket neighborhood, neighbors are the first the first to know what's going on in the neighborhood,” said Chapin in defining what pocket neighborhoods are. Where neighbors know one another, they look after each other, which is the best security, he maintains. A pocket neighborhood, Chapin says, is not the wider neighborhood of several hundred households and network of streets, but a realm of a dozen or so neighbors who interact on a daily basis around a shared garden, quiet street or alley – a kind of secluded neighborhood within a neighborhood.

“Space is shared, but it’s not a commune or a hippie collective,” Chapin told commissioners. “They’re privately owned homes. The key idea is a small group of neighbors that share a common garden. The cottages are spacious but a little snug,” which, Chapin says, is advantageous. “It’s a place you want to come home to.” “Are they more affordable?” asked a member of the audience during the public hearing. They can be designed to be that way, said Chapin, though no price range for the Manzanita cluster development has been determined.

On the higher end, Chapin said a pocket neighborhood developed in Kirkland, Washington, four miles from Microsoft’s headquarters, sold relatively quickly. Reminded that 70 percent of the homes in Manzanita are second homes and that a good portion of them are rentals, both long and short term, Commissioner Owen Nicholson and others expressed concern that it might be difficult to attain the sense of community the developers are striving for with the project.

“One of the issues is keeping a unified compatible neighborhood,” said Nicholson. “In this community, it will be very difficult to achieve what you’re striving for.” Covenants and restrictions could be a factor in limiting rentals. Said Pence, “I’m not hung up on rentals...I’m not willing to say let’s not have any...I don’t know if this would be a problem.”

In his report to the commission, City Manager Jerry Taylor noted that a more detailed phasing plan should be developed with specific timeframes and order of development. “Is it financially feasible for the developer to do this all at once?” asked Taylor, noting that the 23-unit development could be done in three separate phases. The problem, he said, is what becomes of the remaining land if the first phase doesn’t sell or the developer decide not to proceed any further. “How do you handle phasing?” Taylor asked. “The solution,” said Commissioner Eric Lindahl, “would to build the whole thing.” In any event, Lindahl said he hoped the “same team” did the entire project from start to finish, even if it was done in phases.

Among other concerns, Taylor advised the applicants to submit a draft copy of the covenants, conditions, and restrictions for the development with the zone change application and develop a detailed landscaping plan for the common areas.

“This gets at what Manzanita is trying to do,” said Taylor of the pocket neighborhood. The property, which is “off by itself” is a really good place to try this concept. “What the community gets is a unique neighborhood. It’s a less intensive proposal than what could be built there in the future.”

“I visited the pocket neighborhood developed in Gresham and it was really beautiful,” said Manzanita resident Linda Myer in support of the project.

“I think we could use something this,” added Eileen Corrin, a Manzanita realtor, whose main concern was that parking was situated away from the cottages. “It does rain and the wind blows,” she noted.

The Manzanita Planning Commission revisits the pocket neighborhood proposal at its October meeting, at which time the applicant will further address the zone change and a plan for phased development.