



GINN NEWS

Conservation a selling point in western N.C. vacation development

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FERGUSON, N.C. | It's become an old story in the generally unspoiled mountains of western North Carolina: Developer buys up large tract of land and marks out plots for yet another upscale community aimed at luring retirees and second homeowners to the region.

But the ambitious Laurelmor development planned for Wilkes and Watauga counties comes with a balm for any buyer inclined to feel guilt over the impact of development. The project's developer, Orlando, Fla.-based Ginn Co., intends to protect at least a third of the 6,000-acre project with perpetual conservation easements.

"It's being done extremely well" for a development of its type, James Coman III, executive director of the Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust, said Tuesday, as Ginn Co. CEO Bobby Ginn announced his company's conservation plan. Coman's group is to record and monitor the easements, which will protect large pockets of the Laurelmor property from anything but low-impact recreational uses.

To be sure, Laurelmor will still have all the amenities of any high-dollar 21st-century resort: A massive, Biltmore Estate-inspired lodge, with spa, restaurants, clubhouse and an 18-hole Tom Kite-designed golf course, more than 400 condominiums and about 1,500 homesites, ranging in size from three-quarters of an acre on up. Ginn Co. also plans to buy the adjacent Leatherwood Mountains equestrian center.

Lot prices in Laurelmor start at \$450,000 and go up to \$1.25 million. Building costs are estimated at \$250 a square foot, with Laurelmor providing a list of preferred builders.

The developers say they've taken particular care to make Laurelmor as environmentally sensitive as possible. That includes easements to protect sensitive habitat areas, extra-wide buffer zones around streams and waterways, a catch-and-release policy for trout fishing in those streams and a promise to leave eight acres of wetlands completely untouched.

The rugged, mountainous property extends east from a main entrance near Blowing Rock to a spot northwest of the town of Ferguson in Wilkes County, where work on the first phase of the development is to begin this year.

Doug Miller, who is overseeing the project for Ginn, said review boards will enforce strict environmental design standards for the architecture and landscaping of all homes. Plans call for only 9 percent of the development's total surface to be impervious to water, including rooftops, in an attempt to protect groundwater sources and reduce the effects of stormwater runoff.

"We are here for the long haul," Ginn said. "We are here not only for the sellout of the real estate. ... One day we'd like to be the icon of these two counties."

Ginn's company also operates resorts in Florida, South Carolina and the Caribbean. He said he had been hearing for years from customers who wanted homes in western North Carolina, so he spent an estimated 150 hours flying over the state over the past decade looking for the right property.

The company has won the support of Coman, who said that when he was initially asked to meet with the developers early last year, "I knew it was a Florida group. ... I think you can say that with a heavy heart, I went to that meeting."

Initial discussions were about protecting just 14 acres of the property. The company now has committed to setting aside at least 2,000 acres and may go up to 2,750 acres, Coman said.

Houck Medford, executive director of the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, said he does not expect Laurelmor to intrude much, if at all, on views from the parkway, which runs about two miles west of the development's eastern edge. He said the only overlook that has a

view of the development is about six miles away from where the core of Laurelmor will be built.

"Since it is off the escarpment and not directly visible from the parkway," he said, "it's certainly not a project that's in the front windshield of the driver."

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