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Affordable Housing Initiative Comes to the High Country

One of the most pressing needs throughout our High Country communities—and certainly in the immediate Avery, Watauga, Ashe and Mitchell counties area—is affordable housing. Available rentals are scarce, and rates are high and on the rise. The same applies to land for building single family and multi-family housing. As spectacular and economy-boosting as our major high-end communities are, they have also consumed a lot of mountain land which, consequently, has led to land prices increasing dramatically over the past several decades.

Young couples, young families, singles and people needing temporary transitional housing are hard-pressed to find affordable options. Wage earners, small business employees and seasonal workers of all ages face that same challenge. Many of those workers have to commute long distances for work, often resulting in one- to two-hour drives each way. In many cases, that also means commuting via older and sharply winding two-lane mountain roads with few passing zones, all of which adds to commute time. And, with the cost of gas plus many other goods and services having gone up during and since the COVID years while some wages have remained at or near their pre-COVID levels, the added expenses of two-way work travel can cut deeply into family and individual budgets.

Fortunately, there are developers and municipalities exploring ways to help alleviate the affordable housing void for both locals and long-distance working commuters. But it can be a slow process and requires overcoming the diminishing land availabilities and increasing building cost challenges. And, from a strictly pragmatic perspective, any developer or community considering investing time and resources into affordable housing has to consider their return on investment. Will this type of project yield as high a return in sales or rental rates as an up-

scale housing project, and will it be designed to be value-compatible with nearby

All of these factors present a big challenge when trying to resolve the area's lack of affordable housing. However, there are those who have approached the challenge with a concept known as “tiny houses.” These are smaller, space-saving dwellings that offer many of the comforts, design features and modern amenities found in full-sized homes, yet require less land and can be available to qualified customers at much lower costs.

One such recent initiative is a 501(c)(3) organization founded last February called **Tiny Together™**, formed and promoted by Debbie and Greg Stephenson.

“Ours is a community housing non-profit start-up Community Development Corporation (CDC), which is intended to help Avery and Mitchell County residents by providing workforce housing, career and financial education, and community support with job placement,” noted Debbie Stephenson. “We hope to partner with local businesses, regional non-profits, and community health services to provide wrap-around care for participants. As a non-profit, we would be funded through general public donations, affordable rent payments, and grants.

“Our goal is to give people a fresh start—through secure housing with solid career and financial footing—increasing the economic and social strength of our own Appalachian communities,” Stephenson added. We are dedicated to providing low- and middle-income housing and career opportunities for entry-level workers/students, young/single-parent families, Veterans, and domestic violence survivors. We project an expansion of services to include affordable housing communities with mixed rental tiny homes and cottages, spaces for individuals to park their own tiny homes on wheels, and purchase options for some homes, complete with community centers, gardens, green-

ways, and play areas.”

The Stephensons have been participating with the High Country Council of Governments and local Avery and Mitchell Economic Development Committee (EDC) councils to explore ways in which workforce housing can be accomplished affordably. “[We] ultimately decided that we were ready to launch our nonprofit this past February. We are seeking to make workforce housing both beautiful and energy efficient, in an environment that fosters supportive and sustainable communities of residents working and living here full-time,” she explained.

The couple, who collectively have experience in community non-profits, healthcare, and construction project management, continue to develop a board of local community leaders in the areas of finance, construction, healthcare, and project management as well as a group of mentors with small business, legal, social services, financial management, and community development backgrounds.

To build community awareness and help fund their project, the Stephensons have planned several fall fundraising events (see sidebar). In addition, they reported that they are continuing to apply for multiple grants—both federal and state, as well as regional community grants. Inquiries, donations, event information and planned housing services are available at tinytogether.org.

Tiny Together™ Fundraiser

Tiny Together™ will have a special fundraiser event on Saturday, October 5, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Mountain Glen Golf Course Clubhouse. Get better acquainted with Tiny Together and hear about their ideas for the community. Join various area business and community leaders, and see what tiny homes look like. Raffles, prizes, and delicious barbeque plates from Mountain Boomer will be available. From 12 to 1:30 p.m., enjoy live music. Located at 1 Club Drive in Newland. For updates on other promotional and fundraising events, visit tinytogether.org.