

Borough building

Green Hills Borough (pop. 13) scheduled for exponential expansion

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By Lynda Guydon Taylor, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Green Hills Borough is known for its 27-hole golf course, its double digit population and gutsiness in seceding from South Franklin 28 years ago.

It is about to be known for something else: large scale development of about 150 acres and construction of some 440 housing units.

Green Hills, aka Lone Pine Country Club, has been a borough in name only with few, if any, trappings of small town government. That is due, in large part, to the borough's population of 13; its land area of less than a square mile, most of it covered by the golf course; and the reason it came into being.

The borough, a blip on Route 18 which was incorporated in 1978, came into being when Vernon Neal, then owner of Lone Pine, went to court to secede from South Franklin in order to secure a liquor license for his business.

Since then, it has been a quiet oasis, surrounded by South Franklin, said Mayor Terry George, Lone Pine's golf pro, whose mayoral duties are primarily ceremonial. His responsibilities are so few that he spends January and February in Florida.

Anthony Nicollela, Green Hills' de facto manager and Lone Pine's general manager, said there was no question the borough needed more people. There are not enough to function effectively, and there are no meetings because there is no quorum.

"We're basically building a borough. Right now, we have eight or nine [adult] residents. We could blossom to 500-plus," he said, referring to the ambitious housing plan proposed by developer Jeff Thomas.

Mr. Thomas and his father, William E. Thomas, are co-owners of Williamson and Jefferson Inc., a development and construction company based in Peters. The business includes Jeff Thomas' son, Jesse.

Mr. Thomas, a third-generation developer in the home construction business started by his grandfather, the late William H. Thomas, hopes to build single-family houses, townhouses and duplexes in four phases. He is known for building homes in Peters and Upper St. Clair and now expects to add Green Hills to his repertoire.

Jeff Thomas and his father did one of the first planned residential developments, Apache Woods, in Upper St. Clair, Manager Douglas Watkins said. A planned residential development is one in which some of the development is condensed in exchange for more walkways, open space and park space. Mr. Watkins described Mr. Thomas as a first-rate developer who always has been reliable and cooperative.

Mr. Thomas created Lone Hill Development Co. for the Green Hills project. He estimated home prices at \$275,000 and up. Mr. Thomas, a member of the golf club, expects the houses to appeal to singles, empty nesters and country club members, who will get the first pick of the lots before they are marketed to the public. His wife, Patty Thomas, broker and owner of Wellington Real Estate, will market and sell the homes.

The borough is not the only one undergoing a change. Lone Pine changed from a golf course to a country club in January in anticipation of the extras it will offer as a result of development: a swimming pool and exercise facility.

The only thing holding up development, Mr. Thomas said, is a sewage treatment plan. Mr. Thomas said he was talking to the state Department of Environmental Protection and was looking into one of three possibilities. They are building a sewage treatment plant for so-called Lone Pine Estates; entering into a joint venture with South Franklin, which maintains a treatment plant for Franklin Manor Estates; or connecting to the Washington-East Washington Joint Sewer Authority.

Mr. Thomas said it was too early to tell whether there would be any problems obtaining DEP approval. In any event, he said, he is interested only in moving forward and does not care whether he has to build a separate plant or connects to an existing facility.

DEP spokeswoman Helen Humphreys said the state had seen nothing in writing regarding Lone Pine Estates although she confirmed the project had been discussed. It would be department policy, however, to require the developer to talk with South Franklin about using the treatment facility at Franklin Manor, a single-family subdivision of about 185 homes.

The department always prefers an existing facility be used because it reduces discharge, Ms. Humphreys said. Otherwise, the developer probably needs to provide a persuasive justification for not cooperating with South Franklin.

The state ordered South Franklin in June to take over maintenance of Franklin Manor, which the township has been operating since November. The township appealed the order to the state Environmental Hearing Board. The case is pending.

Mr. George said water did not pose a problem because the country club already gets public water from Washington.

Mr. George sees the marriage of the development and the club as a win-win situation. About 250 country club members are potential residents, and anyone Mr. Thomas brings in is a potential club member, he said.

Mr. George is excited about the project, touting Green Hills' proximity to Washington County Airport, Washington Crown Center and Falconi Field, home of the Washington Wild Things.

"I think this side of Washington is going to take off. The east side really boomed throughout the '90s," Mr. George said, referring to commercial growth in South Strabane at Trinity Point and Strabane Square.

He expects McGuffey School District, in which the borough is situated, to reap rewards in tax revenue, although he expects it will not have to build more schools.

People seem to like to live around golf courses, and Mr. George expects that to be a draw for this development.

Cruising around the golf course on a cart, Mr. Nicolella, identified the development's selling points. The golf course is 27 holes, of which one 9-hole parcel, known as the hillside, was sold by Paul Songer Jr. to Mr. Thomas for development. That will leave two nine-hole courses, known as the lakeside and brookside, surrounded by the U-shaped development.

Every unit will have a view of the course because of how the land lays, Mr. Nicolella said.

About a half-dozen developers approached the borough about building homes, Mr. Nicolella said. But Mr. Thomas, a member of Lone Pine, "knew us, we knew him. We had a relationship," Mr. Nicolella said.

Early on, there were plans to develop the site. When Mr. Neal owned the property in the early 1980s, he envisioned building an apartment complex, but when mortgage rates went up, he abandoned the plan, Mr. Nicolella said.

Those plans are coming to fruition now on a grander scale.

Scanning a hilltop, Mr. Nicolella said, "There'll be some beautiful views here."

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