

Development Stirs Doubt

City Tells County It Has Reservations About Plans For Luxury Community

By PRESTON KNIGHT

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HARRISONBURG — At the request of City Council, staff has sent a letter to Rockingham County planners outlining concerns with a proposed student- housing development on Port Republic Road.

The 184-unit gated complex, named after its applicant, Aspen Heights, will be a mix of detached homes, duplexes and townhouses. It is the subject of a public hearing for the county Planning Commission on Tuesday.

Aspen Heights LLC, of Austin, Texas, is seeking to rezone 23 acres on the west side of Port Republic Road, just south of the city limits, for the project. It is across from Rosedale Drive.

The company runs student-housing developments in five other cities serving schools such as Auburn University and Louisiana State University. It touts them as “luxury” living with community amenities such as a clubhouse and pool.

Construction on the Port Road project could begin this summer.

Council members did not take an official position on the project during their meeting on Tuesday. However, they permitted Harrisonburg City Manager Kurt Hodgen and staff to send a letter to the county.

The city often sends such communications to county officials, he said, but since this development was a “ tad” higher profile, he approached council about it first.

City staff and the Harrisonburg Planning Commission have concerns with traffic on Port Road and adding gaps to the existing studenthousing inventory in the city. “ As this development is not accessible by foot to commercial and service uses, it is believed that automobiles will be relied on quite heavi-ly,” the letter states.

Also, officials say, when students leave apartment buildings vacant, families often move in. While that is not a problem itself, Hodgen said it does lead to indirect issues, such as higher enrollment for Harrisonburg’s public schools. Councilman Charles Chenault, who serves on the Harrisonburg Planning Commission, said the development was inconsistent with the city’s comprehensive plan for the area, which calls for single- family dwellings.

For example, the residential portion of the Ashby Meadows subdivision, in the city and just north of the Aspen Heights site, is under development as single-family homes.

“The biggest issue that faces us, as far as the city’s concerned, is what I still consider to be the glut of [student housing] in the city,” Chenault said. “It’s only going to serve to increase that. ...

Right now, I'm not sure that's the direction we need to be going in."

Mayor Richard Baugh said the project may be appealing to the county now, but not the "cash cow" it appears to be later.

The developer or county may pick up costs to extend city bus services to the site. The city will not, officials say. Aspen Heights also may seek a private bus service.

Harrisonburg will provide water and sewer services, if the project is approved. The benefit there is that the city increases its customer base, Hodgen added.

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