



Olivette, a planned community right outside downtown Asheville along the French Broad River. Bren Photography

Creating the world you envision

Green communities emerge in WNC

■ **BY GARRET K. WOODWARD** ■
In Western North Carolina, the green-built movement has transitioned from scattered dots of sustainable construction into pockets of sincere interest and activity, with the scene itself shifting into its next phase of operation – green communities.
“It’s not about the biggest house you can build, it’s about building a thoughtful home – making all of these small changes in hopes of creating a large impact,” said Lesley Groetsch. “How do you get people the maximum energy-efficiency benefit with the smallest investment? Because, frankly, people are about the bottom line.”
Groetsch is the director of sales and marketing for Olivette, a 346-acre planned community right outside downtown Asheville along the French Broad River. With the first of 40 homes to break ground later this year, the “agrihood” property is where sustainability and livability intersect.
“There’s a desire and a will within this community to propel us forward,” Groetsch said “There are a lot of options now. You can build that sustainable dream house of yours, with all kinds of these differ-

ent aspects available to meet or exceed rating standards to achieve net zero – the tool box is big these days.”
Within Olivette, there are solar energy and geothermal heating/cooling initiatives, which complements the physical features of edible landscapes, local grown produce and sustainable building practices. That sentiment is something Bernie Byrne shares too.
“You realize we need to do something different,” he said. “It’s solar and wind energy. It’s keeping as

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— Lesley Groetsch, Olivette

many trees on the property as possible. It’s being responsible with your water and the land itself, and not destroying the land like other commercial developments do.”
Owner and developer of Mountain Meadows, a 58-acre green community in Mars Hill, Byrne is all about working with the contours of the land, something that’s at the heart of the green communities movement.
“I walked the land, and I listened to the land,” he said. “It’s making that real connection to the earth,



Lesley Groetsch



Mountain Meadows.

and bees, something that sits inline with the project’s values and mission.
“We recognize you can’t just give lip service about localizing our food source,” Groetsch said. “And what’s really resonating with our homeowners is the farm, having access to food virtually grown in their backyard, having access to a farmer with our community garden, who also serves as an advisor to community members setting up their own gardens.”
That keen attention to detail, with food and with community connections between neighbors, is something that speaks to Byrne, who himself grew up on a working farm in small-town Iowa.
“It’s about eating real food,” he said. “Everything changed in the 1960s and 1970s when it comes to how food was grown and gathered. It went from the fields to the factories, and now we’re turning that practice back around.”
In terms of green building, Mountain Meadows requires its homeowners to stick within the Green Built NC guidelines, whereas Olivette looks to residents to hit a HERS rating of 55 or lower.
“And we let the homeowners work with their builder to get to that HERS rating,” Groetsch said. “Instead of one way or option to build, we let the homeowners decide what path is best, and what path they’d like to create, to get to that rating.”
But, with all of the interest in green building and communities in Western North Carolina, Groetsch is quick to point out how the state’s laws and guidelines are still “behind the curve” compared to other places around the country, which is something to keep in mind knowing that many folks relocating to

this region are coming from out of state.
“People who are moving here are coming from states with more stringent codes that we have in North Carolina, so we have to be ahead of the game here because they expect that coming here,” she said. “If you’re not ahead of the current state codes here, you might be selling them an inferior product compared to where the prospective homeowners are from.”
And as Olivette and Mountain Meadows each push forward with their respective projects, the idea of green communities is a growing, bountiful seed in the minds of builders and developers around Western North Carolina and greater Southern Appalachia.
“When you move into a community that is planned around a set of values you relate to, you’re going to find that you’re doing the right thing – by the environment, by localizing your food supply,” Groetsch said. “And you will also find the intangible aspect of making a connection, with the people and the land, where you focus on the fundamentals of the vision and the values.”
“We as people have a chance to do something special – with each other, all while taking care of each other,” Byrne added.



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