

DEVELOPMENT

'The best of both worlds'

University City parcel being developed around lake to combine both transit and low-density development

DOUG SMITH

dougsmith@charlotteobserver.com



Site plan courtesy of Hadenstanziale

This site plan shows how single-family houses and townhomes would be built on the north side of the project's signature lake (right). A retail services center would be on the northern edge of the project near W.T. Harris Boulevard. An active adult community of 517 units is planned for the south side of the lake. The acreage closest to Old Statesville Road and the railroad tracks would be a dense urban village with condos, offices shops and a commuter rail station. Walking trails wind through the project's 151 acres of green space.

The longtime steward of nearly 400 wooded acres in the University City area is taking an innovative approach to developing it.

The E.C. Griffith Co. plans 1,104 homes, including an age-restricted community, initially on land near existing neighborhoods at W.T. Harris Boulevard and Old Statesville Road.

Later, as the residential market intensifies and commuter rail service gets closer, it plans to develop high-density housing, shops and services similar in mix to Huntersville's Birkdale Village along railroad tracks paralleling Old Statesville Road.

The plan also includes a site for a commuter rail station.

Griffith has filed a petition seeking a rezoning for its two-pronged approach to becoming the University City area's Next Big Thing.

At first glance, Keith MacVean, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Commission's land development program manager, likes what he sees.

"It's such a huge piece, it can't be all transit-oriented, and it shouldn't be all low-density either," he said. "It represents the best of both worlds."

Also, in the plan's favor, MacVean said, is the landowner's decision to make the development environmentally friendly, preserving a signature lake and 151 acres of green space to include parks and walking trails.

Griffith describes the project, named Griffith Lakes, as "bio diverse," a demonstration that plants, animals and humans can share the same habitat.

The largest of three lakes -- 17 acres -- will have a 100-foot buffer of trees and plants around it, with a walking trail and a ring road so all the residents can enjoy it.

"That was one of the mandates from the very beginning -- treat the site with as much respect as possible," said land planner Jim Haden of HadenStanziale.

"We went out there with a hand-held GPS and did the mapping," he said. "Then we'd go back to the office and adjust our plans to the natural features."

Development assistant Bryan Holladay of Griffith Real Estate Services, the company's development arm, said the vision also includes golf-cart transportation for residents.

Griffith is considering a gated project where age-restricted community residents and other homeowners could use carts to travel internally to services and amenities.

That could alleviate auto congestion around the project and help reduce air pollution.

The E.C. Griffith Co., developer of Charlotte's Eastover neighborhood, has owned the acreage -- one of the largest undeveloped tracts in the University City area -- for more than 50 years.

Preston Fred Griffith, executive vice president, and his brother Jim Griffith, president, say they simply were waiting for the right time to develop it.

They've been busy building apartments and medical buildings along Randolph Road. But with the recent sale of the last lot in Eastover, they were ready to devote time to a new project.

In addition, Preston Griffith said, Northlake Mall and other new developments indicated the University City area could support more high-end housing.

And, too, he said, the North Corridor commuter rail line, in the early stages of planning, would use the Norfolk Southern tracks paralleling Griffith Lakes.

The Charlotte Area Transit System has projected that the first phase could be finished by 2012, linking Charlotte to Huntersville, Cornelius and Davidson.

Griffith Lakes' development timetable hinges on the rezoning. Griffith would like for the City Council to hear its petition in June and make a decision in July.

Once the company gets the go-ahead, site preparation work would take eight to 12 months. Griffith plans to sell lots to residential builders.

Preston Griffith said it's too early to predict home prices in the community, but the intent is for single-family houses and townhomes to be high-end.

The initial residential phase is expected to take three to five years to complete.

The denser town center development phase could take four to 10 years. The company expects to develop it with or without commuter rail, but it would happen faster with transit.

Preston Griffith said "conservative" estimates put the completed value of the project at \$500 million to \$750 million.

GRIFFITH LAKES OVERVIEW

- 395 acres at W.T. Harris Boulevard and Old Statesville Road.

- 325 acres will be developed more like a classic suburban neighborhood with a mix of housing types.
- 70 acres will be transit-oriented development with a station, high-density housing and a town center similar in mix to Huntersville's Birkdale Village.
- 1,104 housing units will be developed initially on the northern and southern edges of a 17-acre lake and close to existing neighborhoods and W.T. Harris Boulevard.
- The first phase total includes a 517-unit active adult community with its own clubhouse and walking trails. Single-family houses and luxury townhomes will have a separate clubhouse and amenities.
- A small neighborhood center of about 183,000 square feet also would be built in the initial phase.
- A future phase will focus on transit-oriented development with 1,788 residential units, 271,500 square feet of retail and 528,000 square feet of offices. The developers could adjust square footage based on what's in greatest demand.
- The project includes 151 acres of green space, including a 17-acre lake. No housing will be built on the lake, which will be a community amenity.

THE LAND

- E.C. Griffith Sr., grandfather of Preston Fred Griffith and Jim Griffith, acquired the Griffith Lake tract more than 50 years ago in a swap for 2.5 acres of Eastover land near Randolph and Colville roads.

Preston Griffith said such swaps were common in that day. Eastover land was in demand for development, and the University City area at that time was considered in the boondocks.

Griffith Sr. carved the lakes into the property in preparation for a dairy farm that never materialized.

Through the years, the family enjoyed the land's natural features as they waited for the right time to develop it.