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## Fancy Gap plans for future

By CHRISTOPHER BROOKE

FANCY GAP — When Carroll County officials asked for community input for the comprehensive plan, they probably didn't expect citizens to bring in a PowerPoint presentation for their community.

But that's exactly what two Fancy Gap business owners, Charles and Margaret Barnhardt, have done, sharing their vision for the community with the planners, officials and others at the governmental center last Monday.

(One town hall meeting for the comprehensive plan remains this week — at the Woodlawn school cafeteria Thursday from 5:30–7 p.m.)

This presentation, the Barnhardts hope, will spark further discussion, as development is expected to pick up near the intersection of the Blue Ridge Parkway and U.S. 52 after multi-million dollar public water and sewer projects are finished.

The Barnhardts have shown their confidence in the future of Fancy Gap through their investments in launching the Treasure Potts antique shop and related garden shop on U.S. 52 and starting a deli and an art gallery, both of which have been leased out to different operators.

Availability of water and sewer service — combined with the high amounts of traffic at Interstate 77's Exit 8, the Blue Ridge Parkway and U.S. 52 — should make the community increasingly attractive to development.

The Barnhardts believe that community members and business owners need to start working now to best prepare for growth.

Their ideas revolve around enhancing Fancy Gap's identity, with the goal of promoting year-round tourism and attracting more high-end residential development and more business traffic.

The Barnhardts's vision of Fancy Gap involves the place along U.S. 52 becoming more of a tourism and lifestyle destination all year long.

Some of the ideas are simple: put up "gateway" signs to welcome visitors coming from the north or the south, soften buildings with landscape plantings and street trees, spruce up existing structures by adding window boxes, planters or painting and more.

Give it a unified, inviting, community look, instead of just having a collection of commercial structures, they suggest.

As long-time owners of a landscaping company, the Barnhardts have experience in giving communities an attractive face to present to visitors and citizens.

"For 20 years, we ran a landscape design-build company where we worked with municipalities, planners, architects," he explained.

They worked within the ordinances to help create attractive retail developments. "So we have a little bit of experience with this."

Fancy Gap could benefit from mixed-use retail and active adult and family residential development going up among the long standing businesses along the U.S. 52 corridor, the community core.

More people living in and visiting the community all year round would mean there needs to be more to do.

Fancy Gap already attracts retirees, second homebuyers and the like to buy high-end housing — that's no doubt why four real estate offices have opened a short distance from the parkway, he said. But the right kinds of new development could enhance that.

"You'd be amazed how many people come in this shop and say, 'Boy, I'd like to retire here,'" Barnhardt said. "Well, if they retire here that means they're going to live here, that means they're going to spend their money here..."

To them, mixed use development means more mom-and-pop shops to townhouses to lifestyle communities to maybe even professional offices, eventually.

Where buildings have large spaces between them, the Barnhardts suggest having infill development going in and several businesses sharing one parking lot to encourage visitors to walk and enter several shops at one stop.

Treasure Potts, for example, might create a nature walk or a woods walk and a seating area in between to connect their four businesses south of the parkway for pedestrians.

A business themed like a Mast General Store would fit in well, they believe.

Hand in hand with that, they want to see the historic community structures preserved.

"New development or anything new doesn't necessarily mean you destroy what's here," he said. "It's taking it and maybe tweaking it and maybe give it a little bit different look."

Future improvements should emphasize Fancy Gap as a community.

They want to see the natural beauty and the beautiful views to be preserved, Barnhardt said. Landscaping with paths, plantings and gazebos along with the scenery could help create the desired look.

"All of that kind of blends into what we call a community setting," he said.

The PowerPoint presentation flashed a drawing of a community with mixed uses, stores, walkable streets and trees to illustrate what they meant.

Key properties in this plan include the Lakeview Restaurant and neighboring motel, Cockerham's and Mountain Top Motel. These three businesses remain a big draw to Fancy Gap now.

"I think the Lakeview Restaurant has been the reason why people have come here for 50 years," Barnhardt said. "We still think it'll be the reason they will still come."

The restaurant and the gas station serve as major gathering places for the community, but they might be even more attractive if there was more of an inviting feel to the area.

And the motel there could become a mixed-use retail area with a town square, outdoor markets and shops, landscaping and more.

Then there's the old tavern down the hill, which could be used for the benefit of the community by making it a museum. Barnhardt knows that traffic there could be an issue on the curvy road, and maybe that could be handled by having a shuttle taking people back and forth.

A residential community could go on Utt's Campground.

To ensure any new and existing buildings are kept up, the Barnhardts also suggest coming up with standards. "One bad building probably brings down 10 good buildings," he explained.

Fancy Gap should also become more pedestrian and bicycle friendly. As a part of that, the Barnhardts wonder if the Virginia Department of Transportation could lower the speed limit through Fancy Gap.

The Barnhardts know well the strengths of Fancy Gap.

They count the location as one — traffic coming from the interstate and out of North Carolina heading towards the parkway. "It can't get much better than that," he said.

As business owners who also scoped out West Jefferson and Ashe County, N.C. , for a place to locate before setting up shop here, they also know that real estate in Fancy Gap is comparatively affordable.

But still, the community could be more visitor-friendly.

"I don't know how many people walk in here and say, 'Well, where is Fancy Gap? Are we in Fancy Gap?' or 'Are we in Virginia?' or 'Are we in Virginia or are we in North Carolina?'" Barnhardt recalled.

That's where the community signs on 52 would come in. The Barnhardts held up Galax's entry signs on U.S. 58 as a good example.

Other recommendations include creating a Fancy Gap Chamber of Commerce, adding visitor-friendly maps and key attractions to Web sites, designing a Fancy Gap logo to brand the community, developing brochures to promote Fancy Gap as a business and lifestyle location and continuing community festivals.

Community members have already been working hard to have Fancy Gap thrive, and the Barnhardts want the community to come together to continue the discussion on how to build on those improvements, they said.

Carroll County as a whole could benefit from increased business activity at Fancy Gap, the Barnhardts said. More shops and stores in the community would mean more sales tax and property tax revenue going to the county, and a greater volume of commerce would also bring in more revenue and business opportunities.

Carroll business developer Bernie Deck has been working with the Fancy Gap community.

"I am grateful for and encourage the kind of input the Barnhardts are showing with this," Deck said about their presentation for the comprehensive plan.

He encouraged others interested in the comprehensive plan to get involved, as well. Getting involved is a good thing.

People in Fancy Gap have worked hard to promote the U.S. 52 and Exit 8 areas. Deck believes they're all a real asset to Carroll County.

He expects the decision of the Carroll County supervisors and administration to bring new infrastructure to Fancy Gap will pay off, due to the business and development opportunities there. "I think it's a good investment," he said.

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