

Two big developments advance in southern NCCo



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(Photo: The Town of Whitehall/Whitehallde.com)

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Big milestones are approaching for two southern New Castle County developments spun off from a huge, failed 1990s project, bringing construction closer for hundreds more homes and commercial sites in the fast-growing area.

Work could begin as early as this summer at Boyds Corner Farms, a mixed commercial and 116-home residential tract at the busy southwest corner of U.S. 13 and Del. 896, equitable owner Charles Owensby said Tuesday. An adjoining, 143-home project to the west, Baker Farms, is under state review and could go to construction in 12 to 18 months.

Several miles north, the Town of Whitehall opened a sales office last week for its more-than-900-acre, 3,783-unit community of mixed-use villages and hamlets, with model home construction due to start as early as this month. Whitehall's first village will have 501 units and 80,900 square feet of nonresidential development. A state review also is underway for a 229-home, less-densely built hamlet section with construction expected to begin in two years.

Owensby, with post-recession caution, said the area's development climate has continued to gain strength.

"I feel, maybe, 'normalized' is the right word," Owensby said. "No one likes to be too optimistic, and nobody wants to get overheated, either."

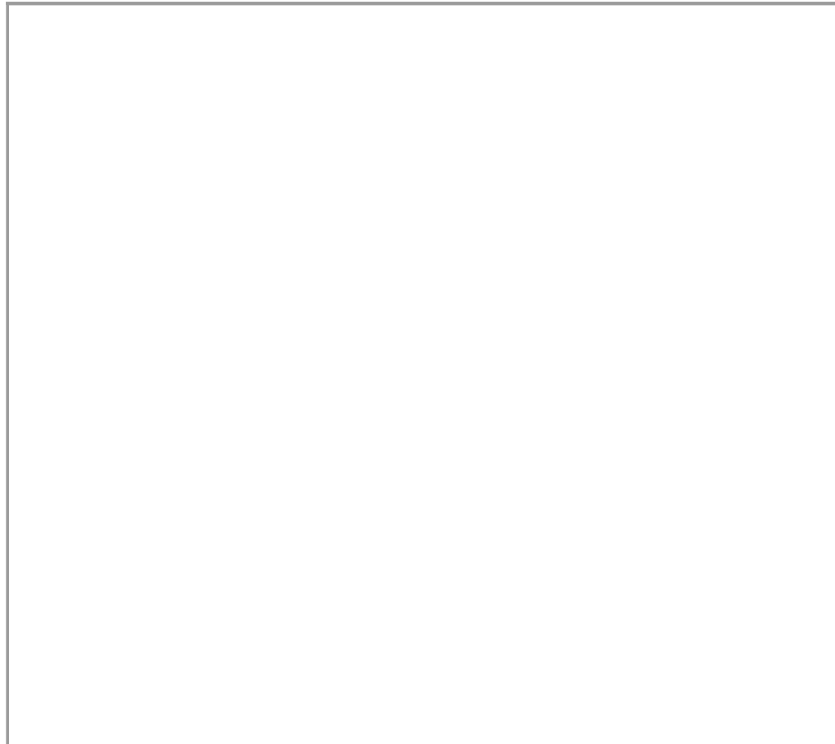
Parts of the Whitehall and the Baker/Boys Corner properties were once in the massive plan to build a 4,000- to 5,000-acre community in the same area, centered on a hoped-for computer chip plant near Summit Airport. The factory never arrived, and plans for what was described in 1995 as a "model community from the ground up" faded.

Blenheim Homes, another party to the larger project, eventually moved forward with the already-bustling Bayberry development along the north and south sides of Boyds Corner Road. Owner Jay Sonecha reported recently that Bayberry had been selling about 100 homes a year for the past three years.

Progress was slower for other partners to the deal from the 1990s, originally centered on thousands of acres owned by the nonprofit Welfare Foundation, an environmental, educational and community-service nonprofit formed by Pierre S. du Pont.

The foundation eventually reached an agreement in 2003 to develop the smaller Whitehall project in partnership with co-founder Brian DiSabatino, who is president of EDiS Co.; Rich Julian, with Eastern States Group; and others. Planning, land-use reviews and transportation uncertainties, along with the recession, slowed things down.

"I don't think people thought we were for real," DiSabatino said. "When they enter the Welcome Center ... they get it. We are really building a town, complete with recreation and entertainment. We expect our model construction to begin within two to three weeks. This is going to be a huge bump to the local economy."



Whitehall's multifaceted development spreads off Lorewood Grove Road near the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal, roughly between the Summit and Roth bridges. The land was proposed for a nuclear reactor complex in the 1970s, an idea eventually dropped.

The overall plan calls for seven distinct village or hamlet communities, with the villages more densely developed and the hamlets less so. Designers are stressing "walkability and bike-ability," with easily reached work, shopping and recreation opportunities woven into the plan in ways that developers believe will drastically reduce motor vehicle traffic.

"The long view of what we're doing is to leave a legacy and demonstrate to the broader community that we can and should do development very differently," DiSabatino said.

State forecasts now show southern New Castle County as the state's fastest-growing area, with population likely to grow 77 percent over 25 years, to about 112,000 in 2040.

Owensby said housing prices have eased across the area, while traffic-congestion concerns appear to be encouraging homebuyers to look north of Middletown, where development surged ahead of road capacity in some areas shortly before the recession.

"There wasn't an inventory of available communities in southern New Castle County pre-recession, and I think Middletown benefited from that," Owensby said. "Coming out of the recession we've had Bayberry, we've had Whitehall that's going to be delivering homes shortly and we've had other communities that have really reaped the benefit" of a steadied housing market.

Developers of both Whitehall and Baker farms said that home prices have moved down slightly, with Baker Farms likely to sell in the \$275,000 to \$375,000 range for a house in a community with an variety of outdoor amenities, including walking trails and a dog park.

"Getting buyers qualified – for the builders, that's still a bit of a challenge," Owensby said. "The demand is there."

Debra Trovinger, a longtime resident of Grande View Farms, off Boyds Corner Road opposite the planned Baker and Boyds Corner projects, said she was surprised by news of nearby commercial development, and concerned about traffic.

"We can hardly get out of our development at all any more," Trovinger said. "The infrastructure down here is horrible."

Traffic congestion and narrow stretches of road complicate travel to Middletown, the nearest substantial shopping and service area, Trovinger said. Motorist attempts to avoid the busy, truck-heavy intersection at U.S. 13 and Boyds Corner Road have caused headaches as they attempt to use neighborhood roads as shortcuts, she added.

The Delaware Department of Transportation has continued attempts to win federal loan guarantees for the proposed U.S. 301 toll road connector between southwest Middletown and the Del. 1 Roth Bridge. Approval of the 14-mile highway could eventually ease traffic, especially trucks.

Owensby and Whitehall representatives both have said that their community developments are solid even without the new highway. But Owensby said the convenience of the new road would likely be another attraction in a market already drawing heavily from New Jersey, New York and other nearby states.

DiSabatino, however, said that the proposed Scott Run Business Park south of Whitehall's main area is "very dependent" on the completion and opening of 301.

"The 301 project is really the project that will drive employment in southern New Castle County" and part of Kent County, DiSabatino said.

"Eventually, I would imagine we'll have to have a traffic light," Trovinger said. "We lived in Bear when the only thing there was a gas station. We moved down here when that started getting overcrowded. I love it down here, but give us something that will be able to sustain the growth."

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