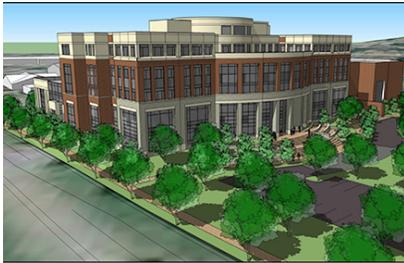


Boone to create Wellness District

by Anna Oakes



Appalachian State University's planned 200,000-square-foot, \$82 million College of Health Sciences building at the corner of Deerfield and State Farm roads is expected to spur redevelopment in the area near Watauga Medical Center.

Originally published: 2014-07-12 16:00:29

Last modified: 2014-07-14 09:26:29

Boone leaders hope to have a new set of development standards in place for the Watauga Medical Center area by the end of the year, Boone Planning & Inspections Director Bill Bailey said.

The new code -- formerly referred to as the Medical District Overlay and now called the Wellness District Small Area Plan -- would provide incentives for redeveloping sites near the hospital according to appearance, intensity, landscaping and height standards outlined in the plan. Appalachian State University's planned 200,000-square-foot, \$82 million College of Health Sciences building at the corner of Deerfield and State Farm roads is expected to spur redevelopment in the area. In addition, the Appalachian Regional Healthcare System has plans to expand and consolidate its offices.

"There's a lot of potential for redevelopment in this area," said Bailey, noting that many of the existing buildings are old and dilapidated.

The town's planning department is working closely with Appalachian State University to develop the new small area plan, which will feature elements of a form-based code. Form-based codes differ from traditional land use codes such as the town's Unified Development Ordinance by focusing less on uses in buildings and more on the massing, character and scale of the buildings themselves, as well as the design of adjacent urban spaces.

"(Form-based codes) describe what we want, not dictate every detail," Bailey explained.

The Wellness District would encompass the area bordered by Deerfield and State Farm roads and U.S. 321. Examples of desired building features include larger building footprints, shared parking and entrances, increased street setbacks and decreased buffering requirements to allow for pocket parks or other amenities and mixed-use buildings with retail or offices on the lower floors and residential on upper floors. Bailey said he had concerns about privacy issues with regard to upper-floor residents being able to see patients coming and going from medical offices, but those concerns could be addressed by stepping back upper floors or screening with green roof plantings.

Examples of incentives for redeveloping properties within the Wellness District including permitting by right with no required hearings, an expedited review process by town planning staff, relaxed parking requirements and increased density, except where watershed regulations apply. If shared parking facilities such as a parking garage are utilized, developers could simply demonstrate that a certain amount of parking is available nearby instead of having to provide a minimum number of spaces, Bailey said. Supporting infrastructure would include gateway features such as kiosks to signal entrances to the district, color-coded street signs, street plantings, improved stormwater, LED lighting and sidewalks, which are currently lacking in the area, said Bailey.

"I think the town will need to pony up in some fashion," he said.

The Planning & Inspections Department first presented concepts for three overlay districts -- the Medical District, Downtown District and Midtown District -- in spring 2012, but completion of the district codes took a backseat to the rewrite of the Boone UDO. The overlay districts are part of an effort to gradually implement land use codes requiring increased density in development within the town, one of the "smart growth" principles in the Boone 2030 Land Use Master Plan. Smart growth seeks to curb urban sprawl by increasing density instead of building outward.

The Boone Town Council and planning staff initially proposed that the overlay districts be created as an alternative for developers, who could choose to develop using the base UDO standards or the overlay district standards with incentives. But Bailey said he now would recommend that the small area plans replace the UDO in the three districts.

A subcommittee of the Boone Planning Commission has been tasked with evaluating ideas for the Wellness District, including parking and residential standards. Bailey said he expects to present a draft to the Boone Town Council within a couple of months. The plan would then be sent to a special hearing for public input, followed by Planning Commission and consideration by the council. Bailey said he hoped to achieve adoption of the plan by Thanksgiving. Development of the next small area plan, the Downtown District, would begin in January, Bailey said. Appalachian Regional Healthcare System pledged in spring 2012 that it would donate a nine-acre tract near Watauga Medical Center to the university if ASU could secure funding for the College of Health Sciences building by Dec. 31, 2014. ASU leaders are pursuing public-private partnerships with medical offices as a means to fund the project.

Last year the General Assembly allocated \$2 million toward planning funding for the project, and ASU sought an additional \$6 million in planning funds this fiscal year. The N.C. Senate budget bill allocated \$2 million in planning funds this year, while the House budget would allocate \$4 million. However, the two houses have yet to enact a compromise budget.

"I do feel confident that the leadership knows the value of this project and understands this is a priority for Appalachian and the region," said Susan McCracken, director for external affairs and community relations at ASU.

Should the Legislature fail to pass a budget adjustment bill or allocate additional planning funds to the project, the project would be delayed, McCracken said.