

REAL-ESTATE

Founders move forward on Lakeland's first cohousing community



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Gail Bagley and David Wood, co-founders of Harwood Village, are working together to establish a cohousing community for retired seniors and adults with disabilities consisting of nine or 10 townhomes across from the Southgate shopping center.
Ernst Peters

In 2010, a reclusive man named William E. Brown Jr. died and went undiscovered for about a month at 211 W. Oak Drive.

The property that once held his house and overgrown yard across from the Southgate Shopping Center will soon be home to a community that aims to ensure nobody dies alone again.

Gail Bagley, Susan Harding and David Wood are working together to create Harwood Village, a blended cohousing community for retired seniors and adults with disabilities.

"I won't say that was a reason for doing this, but it was just kind of interesting that the very piece of property we came, we landed on was a result of somebody who passed away and nobody knew for days," Harding said. "We don't want seniors in isolation or individuals with disabilities in isolation, which can happen very easily."

According to the Cohousing Association of America, the core of cohousing is connection.

"Physical spaces allow neighbors to easily interact with others just outside private homes," the association's website reads. "Common areas including kitchen, dining space and gardens bring people together. Collaborative decision-making builds relationships."

Executive Director Trish Becker said she describes cohousing as "shared time, shared stuff and space, and shared values."

According to the association, Florida is home to three cohousing communities with three more on the way, including Harwood Village. The oldest, DayStar Community, opened in Tallahassee in 1993. There are between 150 and 200 existing cohousing communities in the U.S. and about as many underway, Becker said.

Cohousing communities differ from apartment complexes or retirement communities in a couple of ways. For one, those living in these communities own rather than rent their homes, a privilege rarely afforded to individuals with disabilities, Harding said. And the communities are planned in advance by those who want to live in them.

"We design it. We have sat through a lot of coffee and lemonade ... to decide what is most important in our lives," Bagley said. "This is based on our values, our needs and our futures. So we're not doing this development so we can sell it to other people to live in."

Becker said another key difference is intention.

"A member of a cohousing community enters with an intention to participate in the community and to know their neighbors on a more deeper level," Becker said. "It has completely enriched my life in just about every way."

Brooks Nelson helped found Gainesville Cohousing, which he moved into with his wife and two small children last year. Gainesville Cohousing is a 24-home intergenerational cohousing community. Houses range in size from 950 square feet to about 1,950 square feet.

Nelson, 45, said cohousing helps marry two polarizing housing models in the U.S.

"The concept for people a lot of times is the commune, where everyone is kind of like submerged in their lives and everything is completely together," Nelson said. "And the other opposite is kind of the American atomized lifestyle, where everyone is in their home and they're completely and totally separated from anyone they don't want to associate with in any way. So the cohousing concept kind of merges the best parts of both of those worlds."

'A selfish endeavor': Seeking community

Harding, 63, and Wood, 73, both have adult children with intellectual disabilities who can live independently with some support.

Harding's son, Adam, moved out six years ago and lives with a roommate in a Lakeland pocket community.



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Harding researched communities where residents could share meals and spend time together in a place outside of their homes, which would remain private. She came across the concept of cohousing and reached out to Bagley, who had already been connected with Wood through a mutual friend.

Bagley, 69, has been trying to bring cohousing to Lakeland for years.

"I don't have children," Bagley said. "This was a selfish endeavor on my part to create a small community of seniors that would live together and support each other and look after each other and follow a model of cohousing."

Bagley isn't alone. Becker's desire for community led her to start Aria Cohousing in Denver, Colorado. She and her family have outgrown Aria, and Becker is establishing a "microvillage," a cohousing-inspired community of five homes.

"I found myself living in the suburbs and just experiencing a deep sense of loneliness," Becker said. "We were going to have a child and just felt like we believed that it takes a village to raise a child. And we looked around and realized that we didn't have a village."

Things really started moving for Harwood Village once Bagley, Harding and Wood connected in May 2020. Over weekly mugs of coffee, the retirees have worked on architectural plans for Harwood Village. The community is being designed by Lakeland-based architecture firm The Lunz Group.

The vision for Harwood Village shifted from being retirees-only to a mixed community for seniors and adults with disabilities. The founders believe Harwood could be a "real feather in Lakeland's cap" because there's nothing else like it, at least not nearby.

"Until we met, who knew that there was so much in common between the needs of seniors and the needs of people with disabilities?" Bagley said. "It's kind of amazing."

Plenty left to do

Bagley has been advocating for cohousing in Lakeland since 2015. But these things take time: Nelson said the founders of Gainesville Cohousing met for the first time in 2011. They didn't break ground on the community until 2017.

And the work doesn't cease once communities open.

"Relationships take work. Maintaining common facilities takes work. Community takes work," Becker said. "And it is completely worth it."

Last year, Harwood Village Development LLC purchased half an acre of property for nine or 10 two-story townhomes. Bagley, Harding and Wood celebrated the endeavor at Hillcrest Coffee, their personal planning spot.



The new cohousing community is being planned directly across the street from Southgate Shopping Center. *Ernst Peters /The Ledger*

The group is now working with the city to add 0.16 acres at 215 W. Oak Drive to their parcel and rezone the land from single-family residential to limited impact office. The proposal is up for final approval by the Lakeland City Commission on March 21.

According to a staff report on the proposal, "the additional 40 feet of land will be incorporated into the cohousing project for use as an outdoor garden/pool space for residents and landscape buffer adjacent to the single-family residential use to the west."

If the new land acquisition is approved by the commission, the group will set about finalizing their design plans with Lunz. Harding said they hope to have the rest of the individuals or families interested in living in Harwood gathered by the end of the year.

Once the roster for Harwood is filled, the future residents will pool their money into Harwood Village Development LLC and pay to have the townhomes constructed. The group tentatively

plans on working with Miller Construction, but no contracts have been signed. There's also no estimate for the price of the homes, but they'll be market-rate.

Becker said affordability is "one of the greatest challenges to the cohousing movement." She said some communities self-subsidize and have households put in additional money to lower the costs of some units. And sometimes developers list a certain percent of the community's homes below market rate.

"As a movement, we are thinking very creatively about how to make cohousing more affordable," Becker said. "We believe that community and belonging should be accessible to everyone, regardless of their economic status."

For Harwood Village, townhomes are a more affordable option than a condominium complex because of the need for a commercial elevator. Meanwhile, the founders plan to work with Stiltz Homelifts, a company that installs small, residential elevators for individual units.

"We recognize that you don't really want stairs as you get older," Harding said. "But we've got this piece of property and it's only a certain size; we can't stretch it."

The founders would have liked more property for Harwood. But they traded acreage for location.

Wood said being across from a Publix, several stores and a Citrus Connection stop has been "a real salvation."

A found family

The houses will sit in a U-shaped courtyard so that residents are facing each other rather than a parking lot. Green space will dominate the center, as will the common house that residents can use to cook group meals, watch TV or play a game of pool.

Bagley said that the orientation of the neighborhood emphasizes a core value of cohousing: looking after your neighbors.

The design also allows for group activities. For example, at Gainesville Cohousing, the community recently hosted a Mardi Gras parade. Residents, decked out in their festive best, decorated the fronts of their homes as they would a parade float and offered food and drinks set to music.



Community members working together to build Harwood Village pose with an early rendering of the community. *Photo Courtesy Of Gail Bagley*

Part of the draw of cohousing is the ability to build your own community from scratch.

"The community of people is first, before building the homes," Harding said. "We really want to know that as neighbors, we're going to work together."

Those interested in joining Harwood Village can sign up for a three- to six-month exploratory membership, which Bagley said is a "screening process on both sides." Members learn more about the financial risk and shared responsibility they would incur as a Harwood resident. For example, residents will split community chores, such as tending the garden, taking out the trash or maintaining the pool.

For now, roughly half of the future homes are promised to the founders and their families who spend time together outside of official planning meetings at places like Florida Tropics games. Harding and her husband will live in a separate townhome from Adam and his roommate; the plan is the same for Wood, his wife and their daughter, Joann.

"We were not originally looking at it for us," Harding said. "We were looking at it for our children. But what I've found through our meetings and the times that we get together socially now [is] I have a future family. And that's really important."

Both Harding and Wood are grateful that their children will have the chance to live independently in homes they actually own.

"It's about being able to watch over your child and help them progress to as much independence as they can during the time that we're here," Harding said. "The greatest gift that you can wish for for your child who's got disabilities is that they can, that their life doesn't change dramatically when the last parent passes."

And if securing that future for Adam means taking a risk, Harding — and her co-founders — will take it.

"Somebody has to do it first," Harding said. "So I guess that's us."

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