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Quechee To Add New Business, Home Units

By Guy C. Denechaud

It is a surprise to many that Quechee is not an actual town but one of five villages in the town of Hartford. Even in a part of the country where towns are known for their individuality, Quechee stands alone with an unusual combination of qualities.

Even with the Upper Valley's central and diversified shopping mecca of Route 12-A in West Lebanon just minutes away in one direction, and the variety of shopping choices in Woodstock a few minutes in the other, Quechee continues to offer a surprisingly diverse collection of retail establishments and restaurants. Quechee also has a healthy measure of lodging establishments that range from units of motel chains, to small upscale inns and bed-and-breakfast establishments, including the Quechee Inn at Marshland Farm, and the Parker House Inn.

Hunter Risenberg is the town manager for Hartford, the town in which Quechee is located. "Each of the villages of Hartford has its own character and its own individual history," explains Rieseberg. It is necessary to understand and respond to the changing needs of each of the segments of the diversified community when managing and planning the future of this multi-faceted town. Change is inevitable in all towns and villages, and it is the way that the changes occur that determines how desirable a community will remain in the years ahead.

The fortunes and outlook for Quechee have changed over the last 25 years, since the original Quechee Lakes residential development was created about 1970. The original homes built at that time were primarily designed to be second homes to people who spent most of the year in other regions, many of them cities such as Boston, MA; Hartford, CT; and New York City. The roads and other infrastructure including sewage treatment facilities were built along with the houses to accommodate the needs of the new residential community. With demand for both year-round and seasonal housing strong in the Upper Valley, the outlook for further expansion of housing in Quechee Lakes is bright.

In the last six years, a healthy economy boosted by low interest rates and a rising number of people with sufficient assets to buy upscale second homes, combined with the fact that many who are nearing retirement age think the Upper valley is an attractive place to settle, have pushed prices into a sharp ascent in Quechee.

The average price at which a home in Quechee sells for these days is likely in the half-million dollar range. The continuing demand for homes and raw land in Quechee seems unlikely to diminish in the next few years. The number of vacant lots in Quechee changing hands annually is sharply higher today than it was five years ago. This change, in addition to other evidence, strongly suggests that there is likely to be an increase in home building in this community over the next five years.

Quechee Lakes Development

A next phase of expansion at the Quechee Lakes residential development is being explored, and the plan is that it will continue to be pursued in the months ahead by owner Taurus Investment Holdings of Boston. Taurus was an owner of 75 percent of the project until February of this year when they bought out the prior co-owner. This acquisition was subject to a Right of First Refusal to the Quechee Lakes Landowners Association (QLLA), which was not exercised by the Landowners Board of Trustees earlier this spring.

With the ascent of the Upper Valley as a second home and retirement destination, as well as attractive interest rates in the last decade, Quechee has become one of the most desirable residential locations in the region, complete with many of the recreational amenities of greatest appeal to residents and visitors. Quechee Lakes has built its resort appeal with two 18-hole golf courses as well as a ski hill, trails, a health center and other recreational opportunities. A major construction project in town that is associated with the golf course, the Quechee Lakes Clubhouse, has been recently completed.

In the past few years, Quechee real estate prices have been rising even faster than those in most other Upper Valley communities, and few expect prices to retreat here in the years ahead. With strong housing demand, and some large pieces of land still undeveloped, the time had come for the planning and construction of more homes. Quechee Lakes Development is coming closer to starting work on the next phase: the development of housing on a parcel of land dubbed "5C." 5C is approximately 650 acres, and is the largest undeveloped building parcel remaining in the Quechee Lakes Master Planned Community. This land abuts an area of more than 1,000 acres that will remain naturally open and forested.

According to Peter Garbone, managing partner for Taurus, New England, the 5C project requires different levels of approval involving the town, the state, and Quechee homeowners. Taurus is taking a fresh look at the original agreements that were made in 1998 for development of the parcel. The review of the nine-year-old plans and agreements was deemed necessary before seeking final approvals since some of the original components of the development may no longer be the most desired uses by the community at large.

"Another 18-hole golf course, which was in the original plan, might be less appealing than a 9-hole course or possibly an indoor recreational facility that could provide a wider choice of recreational and exercise opportunities to current and future homeowners," points out Carbone. "We are making and will continue to make, an earnest effort to determine what amenities residents think are most likely to benefit the entire community in the future, for this may be the last significant development by Quechee Lakes for the next 25 or even 50 years," he adds. Carbone says that Taurus views this as a partnership that they have with the homeowners in the community. He says that investing in the right style of development and recreational amenities that are most appropriate now, and continuing to invest in the community in years to come, will benefit current and future residents as it not only will improve the quality of life for residents today, but will support property values here in the future.

Approval by the Quechee Lakes Landowners Association (QLLA) is also required under the agreement between Quechee Lakes Development and QLLA that was negotiated when Quechee Lakes Development bought the development rights to the project in 1998. Community presentations and forums on the proposed project will be held in the near future to give QLLA the opportunity to further study the developer plans and comment on the development of this last major piece of the Quechee Community.

While it is not imminent at this time, groundbreaking for this substantial residential development could take place in the next two years or so. The original plan for the Quechee Lakes Master Planned Community included this phase, and it is possible that significant amenities will be part of this package as vital housing is added to the Upper Valley.

As is the case in Woodstock, there is clearly some prestige attached to a Quechee address, and current property values underscore the development of an upscale residential community. This is not without some challenges in shaping that growth in the most desirable and useful way. It appears that some new and exciting changes at Quechee Lakes will occur in the near future.

Keeping up with growth by providing needed infrastructure, whether roads, water lines or wastewater treatment systems, is also part of the challenge for municipalities. The bulk of the residential properties in Quechee are served by a town sewer system, and the wastewater treatment system currently in use lacks capacity to serve this growing community for many more years. According to Riseberg, the feasibility study for a new wastewater treatment system for Quechee that has been in the planning phase for some months has been completed, and it has also gone through the conceptual design stage. The actual construction of this project is probably still at least two years off. When completed, the new system should be able to handle foreseeable growth in Quechee for the next 20 years.

Special Events and Tourism

Quechee Gorge continues to attract tourists to view this remarkable geological feature as it has for decades. In recent years the number of visitors who have come to the area to view or participate in well-publicized summer events, such as the annual Covered Bridges Half-Marathon and the Quechee Balloon Festival has also grown. These two events draw large numbers of people into town for a short period. While most area residents have become used to the wave of visitors, their annual appearance does pose some challenges to the orderly flow of normal traffic on the area's two-lane roads into the village.

Another attraction in Quechee that has been welcomed by nearly everyone is the new Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) center. Last November, staff moved to new offices at the VINS facility, and in July a new three-season pavilion, with seating for about 150 visitors, as well as additional space for housing birds and a flight cage for injured bird rehabilitation, were all completed. This year the VINS center in Quechee is open from 10am to 5pm daily, and that pace continues from May through October. A number of special programs and futures are offered, attracting nature lovers and especially avian enthusiasts from great distances to learn about the living things that occupy the natural environment throughout the region.

Pass-through traffic on Route 4 is both a benefit and a challenge for Quechee, but as well as being a mixed blessing, it is a fact of life after this village must adapt to rather than try to alter. Quechee is in a similar position to Woodstock in this matter, with the bulk of the highway traffic originating and terminating at points well outside the village borders. Any attempt to address this matter would have to be done on a regional, not a local basis. The pass-through traffic does create economic opportunities for the string of businesses located adjacent to the traffic artery, and those businesses include inns, restaurants, antique shops, and growing opportunities for retail shopping.

In the future, there may be sidewalks in the heart of Quechee village, making it more comfortable and inviting for pedestrians to walk around the commercial center of town. An initiative to consider this prospect will soon be introduced.

Commercial Development

Historically, commercial uses in Quechee have generally catered more to tourists than to area residents, but increasingly new businesses that are appearing, and existing businesses that are growing, seem to have a lot to offer locals. Riseberg says that it appears that a new Anichini Company Store outlet will be anchoring a new development in Quechee, as the company moves across the River from West Lebanon's Glen Road Plaza, and will be opening sometime in the next couple of years.

Barbara West of Quechee Associates confirms that an investment group is acquiring the parcel of land on which the building will be constructed. Quechee Associates Real Este has been serving the real estate needs in the area for more than 20 years, and West brokered the recent transaction.

The development would take place on a parcel of nearly eight acres of land located near Route 4, abutting Gilson Avenue and Marsh Family Road. The original proposal, approved in 2004, is little changed under the current plan, even though the ownership of the parcel is changing. The proposal, approved by the planning commission in May of this year, but still needing a zoning permit, is for a two-story building containing about 20,000 square feet of space, with a footprint of approximately 12,000 square feet.

The outlook for all facets of the village of Quechee appears strong. Activity in the commercial centers by the Gorge, and in special restaurants and inns such as Quechee Inn at Marshland Farm, is brisk. Visitors continue to beat a path to the Gore, to the Balloon Festival and other events. The recreational opportunities include two fine 18-hole golf courses, and a promise of an unhurried lifestyle in a picturesque community, continues to attract both seasonal home owners and full-time residents. Growth that is expected in all areas appears to be organized and planned in a way that should enhance rather than undermine the quality of life in Quechee.