

Blackberry Commons emerges again as the snow begins to melt

NORTH CANAAN — A renewed effort to successfully market a struggling condominium development found some immediate success with a gathering for local business people.

A Business After Hours event was hosted by the Tri-State Chamber of Commerce March 19 at Blackberry River Commons. Sheri Berk, listing agent with Sotheby's International Realty in Salisbury, said it attracted about 50 people to three model homes there, and might have set the tone moving forward.

"Everyone was surprised by how beautiful the homes are," Berk said. "They didn't realize they were designed to be handicapped accessible. They are remarkable in that the approach is discreet but very effective, with an open floor plan and things like larger bathrooms."

As spring arrives, the developer is offering an incentive package with free upgrades and paid closing costs, and the potential for special deals on model homes that are ready for occupancy.

Berk said this winter's snow and extreme cold was a nightmare when it came to trying to show properties. Interest is building across the housing market as it rebounds, and she anticipates a surge of interest as the snow melts.

It has been about eight years

since Blackberry River Commons received the go-ahead from the Planning and Zoning Commission (P&Z) to build up to 21 homes on the site off West Main Street. The original idea was to make it a 55-plus community. Homes were designed to offer options to age-in-place and to expand by adding second floors or finishing basements. The idea is to allow middle-agers and empty nesters to downsize but keep their options open. The larger homes would allow for home offices, guest bedrooms for visiting family members and other options to fit lifestyles that tend to be much more active into retirement years.

The age restriction was recently lifted, at the developer's request, in response to interest from younger people. Berk said they are considering offering a two-story Colonial model that may appeal more to families.

The 10-acre site offers walking trails along its Blackberry River frontage, and the convenience of being within walking distance of the town business center.

Major snags arose before model home construction even began. The price of building materials soared after Hurricane Katrina. A redesign of homes could not bring prices into a range in line with real estate sales in North Canaan, although there is nothing else like this here to compare. On a regionwide basis, prices were comparable.

Berk said listing prices remain at their last reduction (of about \$100,000) from \$269,900 to \$299,900. However, incentives are worth \$25,000 to \$30,000 for buyers.

To date, only one home has been sold and built. Owners

Lance and Ann Beizer have been very vocal about promoting their currently lonely community, particularly at the numerous P&Z meetings where it has been discussed.

One of the issues was the

development's proximity to the sewer plant, raised by the Canaan Fire District, which operates the plant. Potential dangers were raised, but there is no history of mishaps involving generations of children raised in the dense

neighborhood. There have not been complaints of noise or odor. The plant is fenced off and shielded with a berm and trees. Neighbors have complained more recently about conditions at the property, particularly emp-

ty lots overgrown with weeds. Berk said the land was bulldozed clean last fall and an old barn removed. Another incentive plan is also in the works, and may be announced shortly.

— Karen Bartomioli