

Erickson backs out



Worsening economic conditions cited as reason for decision not to move forward in Matthews

Owners of one of Matthews largest tracts of undeveloped land, and the hard-won rezoning of that land, could not withstand the worsening economic conditions in the country. So they've pulled out of the 2007 multi-million dollar deal with the town.

The recent decision by Erickson Retirement Communities to sell its Matthews property profoundly alters the town's economic landscape.

"The continuing national economic downturn and frozen credit markets have created a situation where it is in our best interest to explore all options with the land at the Windsor Run site, including a sale of the property," explained Mel Tansill, Erickson Spokesperson.

Investors have been offered refunds on their deposits and the company continues to assist people, should they choose to move to any of their other 19 retirement communities. Windsor Run would have been the first community in North Carolina for Erickson, one of the leading national developers of full-service retirement communities for the middle-income market.

"They're bracing themselves for, what could essentially be, an economy that could get a lot worse," said Matthews Mayor Lee Myers, who shared the stage with company founder John Erickson at Windsor Run's private groundbreaking ceremony held last fall at their Welcome Center.

The 83-acre parcel of the 105-acre former Fincher Farm purchased by Erickson included a donation of 20-plus acres to the Town of Matthews for use as a park; a \$1-million commitment for road work anywhere in town; and a \$3million commitment to extend McKee Road to the CPCC campus area.

What does this mean for Matthews?

Quite a bit.

“Because of the ‘goodies’ promised to the town by Erickson, it will impact the town,” said John Urban of Urban Architectural Group and current member of the Matthews Economic Development Advisory Board. “But, I think that’s short term. Erickson refunded 500 applicants. With that kind of commitment, I cannot fathom why they pulled out.”

Mayoral candidate H. Jack Davis believes the impact to be a huge loss for the Town. “If my facts are right, this will be a huge loss of tax revenue and jobs. It’s also a loss of \$3 million for McKee Rd. and 20-acres to be used for a local park.”

“It’s a business decision they had to make, and nearly every corporation in America is dealing with that,” Town Commissioner Bill Dixon said matter-of-factly.

Local business owners Bill and Maria Romeo have parents on the waiting list at Erickson who have decided to keep their investment with the company because they’ve discovered a retirement plan they like in Erickson.

“They can stay at any one of the 19 communities across the United States, as Priority members. They’re ‘traveling seniors’ and when they finally settle down to retire, they’ll know exactly what to expect,” said daughter Maria, who has over fifteen years in the geriatric field and works on retirement and estate planning with her husband Bill at American Prosperity Group on Matthews Mint Hill Road.

“The Town is not in any hurry to have the land developed but needs to be aware that any owner, current or future, may want a change and we need to continue to view projects with the same level of detail in an effort to attract the best projects to Matthews,” said Matthews mayoral candidate Jim Taylor. “I’m relieved that we are talking about a project that has not started with half-built buildings and stalled in mid-construction, like some projects outside of town.”

Though surrounding residents will get to enjoy the pastoral view of ponds and meadow, some of the projects other “goodies” will have to be postponed or possibly never realized.

Long-serving Commissioner Suzanne Gulley was the first one on the town board to publicly suggest, back in 2007, if the developer could help pay for the extension of McKee Road. In her folksy manner, she asked the petitioners, who were then seeking rezoning for the Erickson project, if their commitment could include the roadway. It eventually did - \$3 million-worth, to be exact. But, Gulley, a Matthews native and active participant in historical preservation, also focused on another Erickson promise - the creative use of the 20-plus acres for a park and \$1 million to park development next to the 1,100-plus-unit residential retirement facility.

“I wanted to locate a living history farm on that acreage, so that children could see cows being milked, know what it was like to churn their own butter and plow the fields for cotton,” she said. Volunteers from the adjacent retirement community would make perfect volunteers and

community hosts, as well. We could have located the old pottery that we have been trying to preserve there and possibly built a Bank of Matthews replica there to house the bank memorabilia that was recently rescued from the History Museum in Charlotte.”

Erickson’s decision to pull out of Matthews doesn’t surprise those in the “aging” business. Medical offices and services continue to build, and flourish, in this market. Real estate aimed at those seeking retirement options might actually benefit from Erickson’s departure.

Ty Cain with Willow Grove Retirement Community on Idlewild Road in Matthews says his facility provides many of the same services as Erickson and has, in fact, benefitted from their decision to close up shop. “Erickson has graciously referred many of their prospects our way. We provide many of the same services,” Cain said about Willow Grove’s apartment homes. ‘We’ve already tipped out 50% occupancy and we’re not even six months old yet. Gullely pondered.

“Over 500 people had already signed up to become Erickson residents. Like the residents at (A.C.T.S) Plantation Estates, those seniors would have been active in our community, helping with the economy as they shopped, dined and joined local charity-driven groups.”

Spokespeople for Plantation Estates had not gotten back to The Matthews Record by press time. The economy is doing a number on a lot of major developments. But it’s not the end of the story, as the ever-optimistic Mayor Myers said.

“It’s disappointing, but it’s caused by the national and world economic situation. Matthews is a strong contender. Erickson is preparing for the worse case by taking this action. The market for this type of property will continue to increase.”