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Cohousing creates family villages inside city

Groups aim to be ecologically friendly

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By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Lake Fong/Post-Gazette

Members of a cohousing community from left, Ayres Freitas, Doug Cooper, Janet Schuster, Danelle Ardell, Stefani Danes and David Elliott practice paddling Friday at Millvale Riverfront Park.

Eight households in and around Pittsburgh are on the hunt for land together. They're angling for the East End since most live there now.

As part of the national cohousing movement, they are seeking the life that got away when families went nuclear -- when neighbors had each other's backs, pitched in, put mom-and-dad eyes out on all kids and took care of the old folks.

"I try to explain it as the old-fashioned idea of neighborhood," said Stefani Danes, an architect who has researched cohousing as a member of Pittsburgh Cohousing, the first group in the city to join the movement.

Cohousing originated in Denmark and has been gaining American adherents since the early '90s, after publication of the book "Cohousing" by architect authors Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant.

Diana Leaf Christian, a national expert who lives in a cohousing eco-village near Asheville, N.C., said at least 116 communities are established and roughly another 150 are in the stages of finding and purchasing land.

"I think we have an innate longing for connectedness," which may be missing from a lot of lives, she said. The movement aims to get it back, to rebuild the old societal constructs and, in many cases, with net-zero energy use.

Each household is privately owned. Members mutually own a community house where guests can stay, with a big kitchen for regular shared meals, maybe a wood shop or art studio.

Pittsburgh Cohousing is a merger of two groups, both about 4 years old. Members have looked at properties in Homewood, Garfield, Lawrenceville, East Liberty, the Hill District and Hazelwood.

"The idea is to have 25 to 30 households, but with 12 committed, we can start," said Wendy Hardman of Swissvale. "We need more people. We have a variety: older couples, a young couple, a couple of gays and singles, and interest from a woman in grad school."

The group includes avid gardeners, a photographer, a computer programmer, a staff development consultant, an accountant and two architects.

Some want new construction, others favor existing buildings if they can be revamped affordably. The group meets regularly, preparing for the day when their living arrangements must survive self-centeredness.

In late June, they brought Ms. Leafe Christian to Pittsburgh for a workshop.

"We don't have much divisiveness, but we need to learn more about the tremendous number of decisions we know we'll have to make," Ms. Hardman said.

A successful cohousing community requires a shift of mindset on how to live, Ms. Leafe Christian said. It includes "cooperation, some shared resources, a common meal every week" and responsibilities for the common good. "The hardest part is remembering that what we do can affect others. We all live downstream from each other."

Ms. Danes said an infusion of 25 to 30 new households committed to being ideal neighbors "can be a fabulous catalyst for development in a distressed neighborhood."

"Oh, absolutely," said Rob Stephany, executive director of the Urban Redevelopment Authority. "I'm totally excited with this idea. This group shares values of sustainability and a strong ethos of what community means. They want to be a part of something bigger, integrated into a community. We've been chatting about a variety of sites, and they're vetting some sites."

Pat Buddemeyer of East Liberty said her priority, beyond affordability, is to be engaged with the larger neighborhood "in an eco-village with a small footprint."

Ms. Danes said cohousing has motivated many to leave the nuclear-family lifestyle behind. "The environment gives the richness of having an extended family, and all the things villages do," she said, "and when you retire, you're in a community with a role in other people's lives and the security of having people around."

To find out more about Pittsburgh Cohousing, visit www.pittsburghcohousing.org or call Pat Buddemeyer at 412-441-6593.

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