

ElderGrace Charts New Course for Eco-housing

A discussion with Spencer Haynsworth by Dorothy Shubow Nelson

Residents Could Be Stewards of The Arroyo

Members of the new ElderGrace co-housing development will have the unique opportunity to become stewards of the nearby Arroyo de los Chamisos as a result of a unique partnership with Earthworks Institute. Residents of the development will be encouraged to learn how to restore and improve the health of the arroyo and maintain the integrity of the habitats for the animals and plants that live there. They will witness the ways this system has been damaged by careless uninformed development of the surrounding areas.

An active organizing group of prospective owners has been planning this co-housing community since 2006. The Eldergrace project, a certified Enterprise Community Partners "Green Community" managed by the Santa Fe Community Housing Trust, is expected to open in 2009. ElderGrace is a participant in the nationwide Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Neighborhood Development program.

Eldergrace began when a few people came to The Housing Trust with the idea for an affordable co-housing development that would serve the needs of older adults who were interested in creating a dynamic and healthy community. A membership group of prospective residents grew and formulated their hopes for what

has become a unique elder co-housing community, only the fourth project of its kind in the United States. The Housing Trust already owned the land, located near Cerrillos Road and Richards Avenue. Twenty-eight single-family duplex homes and a large common building will comprise the site with room for private yards and semi-private porches.

"Our vision is to offer the vitality, authenticity, environmental sensitivity, and freedom of spirit that conscious aging generates."

In addition, the site is near a large arroyo, the Arroyo de los Chamisos. Spencer Haynsworth, A Frederick P. Rose Architectural Fellow working with The Housing Trust, broached the idea of the need to restore the nearby arroyo with the ElderGrace membership group. Haynsworth encouraged a partnership between ElderGrace and Earthworks Institute. With support from the City of Santa Fe, Earthworks will be involved in this pilot neighborhood housing development that expands the idea of living space to include the preservation and restoration of the nearby natural environment.

It is natural for heads to turn when water is flowing in the acequias, arroyos and rivers in Santa Fe and throughout the varied terrain of New Mexico. The way water moves and connects to other bodies of water is often not visible to the public. Haynsworth feels that we need to see water and its configurations more regularly in order to appreciate and protect the movement of water.

Neighboring communities could be more involved with the waterways that make up their environment.



As a graduate student in the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, Haynsworth studied a systems approach to landscape architecture and design. She explains, "We are tied to these natural systems. Think of the site for development as layers of history, both human and natural, the processes of erosion, sedimentation and water flow, and inhabitation of animals, people and machines – all these forces are at play pushing each other. When you insert your design into those natural systems you change everything. High concentrations of development has had a huge effect on arroyos – impervious roofs, impermeable pavements, retaining walls that don't consider the direction of the flow of water, create barriers – there is no place for the water to go. At high speed it floods arroyos and damages and erodes the banks. Instead of a wider, larger arroyo with a gradual slope they become these dark cavernous spaces."

Haynsworth is hopeful about the role humans can play. "We are part of these systems. A community could take ownership of an arroyo, could be aware of their watershed – where their water is going, how it affects other plants and animals and the land."

Besides offering affordable and market-rate condos for seniors, and training stewards of the land, ElderGrace intends to be a green community. The group wants to live lightly and efficiently. Energy and water efficiency are a priority. In addition, ElderGrace homeowners live in walking distance of stores, services and public transportation. Haynsworth emphasized the importance of long-term livability. "We don't want to add affordable housing that people can't maintain. We must care about maintenance costs, and health and safety of living. Everyone should have clean indoor air quality, good ventilation and universal design that allows easy conversion to accessibility if needed."

Working with Earthworks, the residents of ElderGrace will learn about the nearby arroyo's natural habitat,

will be able to identify the tracks of animals, provide eco-tours to the community and help to create an oral natural history of Santa Fe, restoring it physically and through the oral tradition. They hope to work with youth groups to rebuild and replant the arroyo with native trees and plants and bring the arroyo back to health. This is an intentional green development community. People are interested in water conservation and conservation of community and how they go together.

Haynsworth asserted, "Standards can be set but unless there are people in the community to follow through, it means nothing. Stewards are needed. The green movement is missing people." She added, "Working with Earthworks is the most exciting piece of this development for the City of Santa Fe."

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