

Coalfield Progress

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Study Evaluates Housing Facilities, Options

By Robert Baird, Staff Writer

Finding off-campus housing is a difficult task for many University of Virginia's College at Wise students.

"Very few of the apartment complexes in the private sector focus on renting specifically to students. In fact many landlords in the Wise area do not particularly enjoy renting to UVa-Wise students," according to a housing demand study by Brailsford & Dunlavey.

Students participating in focus group meetings mentioned it's difficult to secure rental housing when a landlord knows the potential tenant is a college student.

There are, however, a few "student friendly" complexes which provide living accommodations and amenities needed by students, the study says.

The private housing market is "highly fragmented" in the Wise area, according to Brailsford & Dunlavey. UVa-Wise students have a multitude of off-campus housing options - including apartment complexes, duplexes, stand-alone houses and mobile homes.

"Despite these many options, students have very few off-campus housing options convenient to the UVa-Wise campus," the report says.

Most college students living off campus are not within walking distance of UVa-Wise.

The general lack of rental housing available in Wise has forced many students to live outside the college's immediate area, in places such as Norton, Coeburn and Big Stone Gap. "The lack of housing convenient to campus makes UVa-Wise's on-campus facilities a very attractive housing option to students," the study report says.

Brailsford & Dunlavey, of Washington, D.C., was hired by UVa-Wise to evaluate the feasibility of a planned "Corner Village" project that would create student housing and retail space adjacent to the Wise campus. The study established a need for "near-campus" housing.

As part of its efforts, the consulting firm studied the off-campus rental housing market to evaluate housing alternatives available to students considering off-campus living.

PROPOSED HOUSING

Through discussions with Wise County building and zoning officials, Brailsford & Dunlavey learned about two student-focused housing projects being planned or under development near UVa-Wise. They are:

**** WISE HOSPITAL.** K&F Venture LLC is converting the former Wise hospital site into college student housing. Corporation official Thomas Kennedy was interviewed by the study firm and indicated the housing project will be developed in three separate phases.

The first phase will open this fall and house about 34 students in apartment-style units. The second phase will open either this fall or spring 2006 and house about 60 students in suite-style units having a bedroom and private/semi-private bath, the study says. The second phase will provide residents with common laundry spaces and common study lounge/TV lounge spaces.

Phase three will be developed only if the first two phases prove financially successful, the report says. The third phase, if developed, would house 40 students in suite-style units.

If fully developed, the project would provide housing for about 134 college students.

**** NEAR THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL.** MidSouth Development LLC will develop a student-focused housing complex at 9635 Coeburn Mountain Road, beside the Wise County Christian School and within walking distance to the college. The project is in preliminary stages, the study says.

HOUSING FACTS

The study offers a variety of facts and figures regarding off-campus housing, including:

*** Ten of the 15 properties studied by Brailsford & Dunlavey were apartment complexes/duplexes, three were mobile homes and two were single-family houses;

*** None of those properties cater exclusively to UVa-Wise students;

*** Six of the properties allow tenants to sign "student-friendly leases," which do not require students to sign up for a full 12-month period;

*** The majority of rental properties in the Wise, Norton and Coeburn housing markets are in "fair to good" condition;

*** Ten of the 15 properties were fully occupied when evaluated. Of the 148 units in this study, seven were listed as vacant. The average occupancy rate is about 95 percent;

*** The average monthly rent for an off-campus bedroom is \$242 per month. That's an average monthly rent of \$270 for a studio/efficiency unit, \$314 for a one-bedroom unit, \$184 for a single bedroom in a two-bedroom unit and \$200 for a single bedroom in a three-bedroom unit;

*** Based on a 12-month lease, the most economical off-campus housing option would be a single room in a two-bedroom unit - at an average annual cost of \$2,208 per person;

*** On-campus apartments include utilities in monthly rent rates while many off-campus properties do not, the study says;

*** Brailsford & Dunlavey added a monetary figure for utilities into the cost of off-campus units. Students indicated through an online survey that the average cost of utilities is about \$165 - per month, per person - for off-campus housing.

*** So, a \$165 utilities cost factor per bedroom was added into off-campus unit pricing;

*** The cost - both rent and utilities - of a studio/efficiency unit jumps to \$435, while the total cost for a one-bedroom unit is \$479. An off-campus two-bedroom unit costs about \$697 versus \$720 for similar on-campus housing. An off-campus three-bedroom unit costs about \$1,095 versus \$1,080 for similar on-campus housing.

*** On-campus housing units are competitively priced compared to those off campus, the study says. Prices for on-campus housing include benefits that cannot be measured monetarily, such as proximity to classes, proximity to educational resources and unique social settings.