

In My Opinion

Spicer Mill Farm Filled a Need

by Frank Walker

Editor's note: Recently, we received a flyer from the Joseph T. Samuels Real Estate Service. You know the kind. Lots of beautiful properties at prices that give new meaning to the saying, "Better buy land. They ain't making any more of it and it ain't getting any cheaper." But it was Joe Samuel's commentary that captured our attention.

Keeping Rural Values In a Robust Market

by Joseph T. Samuels

"Growth seems to be an issue for every community in the states I have visited. For the most part, Central Virginia citizens are cognizant of the importance of our rural areas and the need to provide for their protection. We are fortunate that while rural areas are under such pressure (1) there is an increase in conservation easements which protect them in perpetuity, (2) the dynamic changes to the City of Charlottesville make it one of the few growing cities in Virginia reversing flight to the suburbs, and (3) zoning changes taking place throughout the region place an emphasis on smart growth, open space and natural areas protecting our watershed.

This is all good news as the real estate market continues to be robust. Equally impressive is the willingness of newcomers to share with us in the protection of our rural areas essential to the quality of life. We wholeheartedly welcome that interest and shared goals."

Editor's note: One Orange County development seems to measure up in terms of what kind of development works well. Frank Walker explains why.

Amid all of the development and rumors of development that have convulsed Orange County in recent months, a small delegation that included Society members and a Spicer Mill Farm resident met with David Edwards, Director of the Winchester Regional Office of the state's Department of Historic Resources. The purpose of the gathering was to discuss the possibility of placing part or all of the county's Spicer Mill Farm development area into an historic district.

Spicer Mill Farm was a dream and project of Woodbury S. Ober, who had retired to Orange County in the late 1940s after a career in banking. As he had done during his working days, Woody Ober, along with his wife Jane, looked for ways to improve their community, and the Spicer Mill Farm development was but one of their significant contributions to Orange County.

As the Obers noted, Orange County had its palatial residences on farm-sized tracts, plus a number of small-to-medium sized residences on lots of the same description. What was in short supply were moderate-sized homes on several-acre lots, something that would attract and retain the business and professional people that Orange County needed for its future. A few such homes had been built along Little Skyline Drive, and the old Spicer farm adjacent to them was for sale. The Obers bought the farm and started planning.

First, they assembled a team of consultants. O. Robbins Randolph provided expertise in engineering; advising on building sites, lot layouts, and roadways. The legendary Charles F. Gillette was retained for his expertise in landscape architecture. Noted architect William Newton Hale of Charlottesville advised on house designs until his death in 1954, after which the Charlottesville firm of Johnson, Craven, and Gibson assumed that responsibility. Lots were laid out, with specific homes designed for certain of the lots, and

continues on page 3



Until June 20, 1954, \$39,000 got you 1,121 square feet, plus two baths, a garage, a laundry room, a tool room, an entrance hall and a porch.

Spicer Mill Farm: A Vision of Quality...continued

Spicers Mill, continued from p. 2

the Spicer Mill Farm subdivision became a reality.

The lots sold slowly, but that is a matter of no great moment. The emphasis remained on the quality of the development, not the rate at which money rolled in. Even now, years after the Obers' deaths, some half-dozen lots of the approximately fifty-lot subdivision await their homes, but the quality of the development is established. The question has now become: Does this development, one that was unique even for its day, now qualify for Historic District recognition?

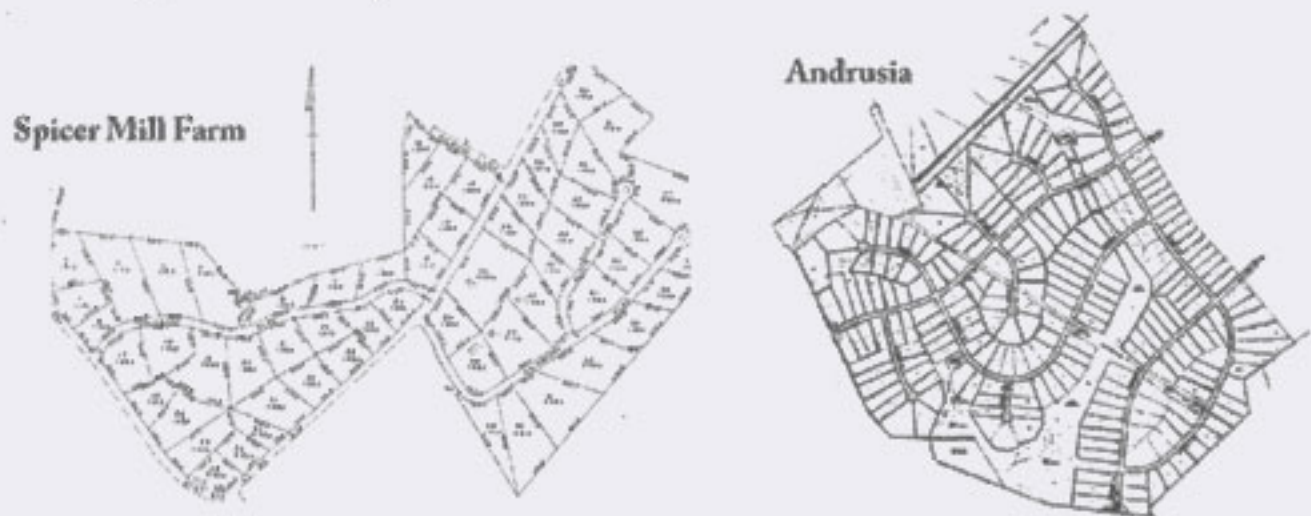
David Edwards pointed out that a Historic District designation would have no effect on what private landowners, using their own money, wished to do. They could conceivably

build a structure totally at odds with the architecture of the subdivision or tear down one of the original houses. There would be guidelines and controls, however, where public money was used within the district. For a mature subdivision such as Spicer Mill, work involving the roads would be the most likely trigger for that sort of oversight. The most important contribution of a Historic District designation would be to assist homeowners who wish to rehabilitate or restore a "contributing structure," affording possible access to sources of funds and the availability of tax credits.

A "contributing structure" in the contemplated historic district would have to be at least fifty years old, and it may turn out that a few more years are needed before enough of the Spicer

Mill Farm residences qualify. If that is so, the idea will be put on hold, but not dropped. As development engulfs Orange County, the need to recognize the vision of Woody and Jane Ober and the quality of their subdivision becomes an even more important benchmark for its residents. ■

Editor's Note: The contrast between the Spicer Mill Farm development described above and the proposed Andrusia development below, is size and density. Orange County residents driving along Spicer's Mill Road have seen several (we counted nearly 60) test perk holes on the property. Lou Thompson, husband of Board Member Laura Thompson, remarked as we went by: "Looks like they're burying Orange County in development."



On the left is the lot plan for Spicer Mill Farm, circa 1954. On the right is the lot plan for the proposed "Andrusia." The Spicer Mill Farm has but about 50 home sites on less than 100 acres, or an average of approximately 1.50 acres per home site, while the "Andrusia" development proposes about 236 home sites on 268 acres, or about 1.1 acre per site. The principal difference between the two developments, of course, is in the number of homes being built, the amount of time it would take to complete the development, the likely impact on the infrastructure of the community, and, perhaps most importantly, the purpose for the development. As Frank Walker points out above, there was a lack of affordable housing for those who wanted to live and work in Orange County. Spicer Mill Farm was created to fill that void. The "Andrusia" development, however, fits a pattern of development that is moving inexorably toward Orange: housing for those who may or may not work in the county. While development is perhaps best managed by keeping it close to the community's core, rather than let it develop on a spot basis throughout the county, the effect on the community's road system, water supply, schools, etc., must be of prime concern because the residential tax base generated by new construction in most cases does not pay for the improvement or expansion of the infrastructure required to serve the increase in population. The Newsletter is indebted to Bill Nevell for providing the plans of "Andrusia".