

Development firm seriously pursuing Timber Springs project

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With an understated and cautious sense of optimism, developers and local officials are anticipating the first signs of serious progress on the Timber Springs retirement community in nearly two years.

A Dallas-based development company working under the name Archangel Capital Partners has entered into a contract to buy the Timber Springs site on Maroney Drive, and within a week, the company should learn the result of various market studies that could put construction equipment in place by the end of the year, according to Joe Geer, a principal at Archangel.



Christy Wooten/The Daily Sentinel
(ENLARGE)

Site work for Timber Springs could begin before the end of the year, according to cautiously optimistic developers working on the project.

The company's involvement is significant because it is the first time that outside money has been injected the long-delayed project, according to Jerry Holbert, chairman of East Texas Senior Living, the board of directors that has overseen the project since its initial stages.

"After all these years of working on this thing, that is the first group that's actually come forward and said, 'We'll put some of our own money into the deal to help get us there,'" Holbert said.

Reached by telephone Thursday, Geer was reluctant to speak definitively on the future of the project, citing unfulfilled promises for the retirement community that have been publicized in the past two years. But he confirmed that a market study, feasibility study and appraisal were under way. The results of those studies will determine the final size and shape of the project.

"In the financial market that we're in today, the state of the economy is that the lenders get to pretty much dictate what gets built," Geer said. "Regardless, our objective is the same, and that's to build a winning project, a successful project for Nacogdoches."

The Timber Springs project has been marketed in the past as a lavish, \$50 million community with condos, stand-alone homes, assisted living and on-site medical care, with tie-ins to local entertainment and cultural opportunities. But the project has had difficulty attracting investors and finding other sources of funding because of difficulties in the financial markets. Archangel Capital Partners, a private, for-profit entity, will raise money through a combination of debt and private equity investment, Geer said.

Holbert said Archangel's involvement and its plans for Timber Springs are the most serious efforts to date, with actual money spent on land and running the local marketing office in Nacogdoches.

If all the plans work out as planned, Holbert's board of directors would remain on the project in an advisory capacity and could possibly morph into Timber Springs' residents council. Several board members have paid deposits to reserve a home in the community.

After meeting in past weeks with representatives from Archangel Capital and the East Texas Senior Living Board, City Manager Jim Jeffers said he was as optimistic as ever that the project would come to fruition.

"This is the most optimism that I've seen that we may actually get the project financed, and so people are excited. But also because of all the other disappointments, they're cautious with that excitement," Jeffers said.

Jeffers said that because the deal is pending between private entities, the city will not be involved unless there was a need for economic incentives like tax abatements. He also said a successful project would benefit all of Nacogdoches.

"To entice retirees who have pensions and retirement funds to come to the community is a pretty sound investment strategy for the city and the county," Jeffers said. "As the population of the city grows and we increase the per capita income, then that's going to make us more competitive in terms of retail recruitment and industrial development."

Bruce Partain, president and CEO of the Nacogdoches Chamber of Commerce — a longtime champion for the Timber Springs project — said the signs of progress were healthy.

"They've been very careful to try to not overstate anything that's going to happen, so any positive news right now that's being released is a big, significant move," Partain said.

If completed according to plan, Timber Springs would complement Nacogdoches' status as a certified retirement community, Partin said, adding that delays had not diminished the project's importance.

"Just because the timing's been drawn out doesn't change anything as far as the importance to Nacogdoches and the major boost it's going to give our efforts to recruit retirees to our community," Partain said.

An updated status for the Timber Springs project will be available in coming weeks, according to Geer.