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Havurah center of new neighborhood

By Paul Haist

Several members, friends and neighbors of Havurah Shir Hadash in Ashland have come together to create a neighborhood around the Havurah that will enable them to share a closer sense of community and, even though not every participant is Jewish, a closer relationship as well with the Havurah.

Aleph Springs is a small planned community of 14 new residences and one existing historic residence that, when complete, will comprise nine homes and a six-unit condominium.

"Our vision is a caring, supportive neighborhood for people of all ages, able-bodied or not, with a wide range of financial situations," said Dr. Laura Robin, chair of the Aleph Springs working group. "To the best of our knowledge, we are initiating a unique approach to Jewish community living in the United States."

On their Web site (www.alephsprings.com) they call it "haimish living" and cite a simple homey, warm, relaxed, cozy and unpretentious life style.

The participants want their community to be more than just a group of homes. The houses and the condominiums will share backdoor walkways, a community garden, a playground and easy access to the Havurah, a Jewish Renewal community.

They see the Havurah as a unifying element for their community. Besides religious services, the Havurah offers a variety of non-denominational programming such as a pre-school, film nights and concerts.

"Aleph Springs will be a place where people can come together, regardless of religion," said Laurel Miller, a member of the group that purchased the property.

Builder Larry Medinger said the 2.5-acre Aleph Springs site was assembled as a subdivision from three parcels adjacent to the original Havurah property. It surrounds the approximately one-acre Havurah site on two sides.

Robin explained that most of the startup financing was provided by more than a dozen Havurah members and friends organized as the Havurah Friends Investment Group and doing business as Aleph Springs.

"They joined together to purchase the land and pay for planning and permit costs. At some point we will take out a construction loan to build the condominiums," said Robin.

Work already has begun on the project on the neighborhood's streets and utilities. Medinger said that construction of all eight homes likely will take "several years" to complete. He put the cost of the project at about \$6 million and added that the cost would vary depending on individual designs.

Home prices are expected to range from the mid \$200s to the upper \$400s. Each residence will be designed to accommodate people of all ages and those with physical handicaps, according to an Aleph Springs announcement.

Robin said, "Havurah traded land with our group to make better use of the property for both parties. This arrangement provided the Havurah with a larger common space adjoining the neighborhood common area."

Aleph Springs will provide Havurah with a new paved parking lot as part of the deal.

Tim and Fran Orrok are among those who will make Aleph Springs their home. Tim, 77, and Fran, 70, have made their home on Ashland's Ivy Lane for the last 20 years.

"We are eager to become part of a project that supports the Ashland values and spirit that have been such an important part of our lives," the couple wrote in an e-mail to the Jewish Review.

They pointed to the benefit of Aleph Springs' sunny southern exposure, the energy efficiency afforded by shared walls, the pleasant open spaces, green spaces, a planned wetland and community garden, as well as their proximity to Havurah and the ease of interaction among residents including between elders and children.

"This plan is a win-win for us, for Havurah, the residents and for Ashland," wrote the Orroks. Devorah Zaslow is the wife of Havurah Shir Hadash Rabbi David Zaslow. She is at least as enthusiastic about the project as the Orroks.

"We see this project as being in harmony with the needs of the Havurah and the needs of the Ashland community," said. "This project will be the first of its kind and model in Jewish Renewal."

Aleph Springs is accepting refundable deposits from people interested in joining the neighborhood.