



Housing Divided, Part 11: Developer draws up blueprint for workforce communities

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On Tuesday, snow fell on the Lincoln Park construction site. Foundations for new homes were covered in tarps to protect the newly poured cement. Construction workers nailed in boards on the more complete structures as snow swirled around them. Despite the weather, people were busy building the newest addition to the Wellington Neighborhood in Breckenridge.

“Guys will be working, just straight on through; through the weather. These guys are so tough that do this,” said David O’Neil.

His comments reflect the respect he carries for the worker bees in the county, people who he believes are the backbone of the Summit County community.

O’Neil is CEO and founder of Brynn Grey Partners. His Boulder-based company has made deed-restricted workforce housing a central focus of its business, but the company isn’t just building homes. The mission is creating living, breathing and affordable neighborhoods. Among the projects O’Neil’s company has brought into existence are the award-winning Wellington Neighborhood in Breckenridge and Peak One Neighborhood in Frisco. The newest project, Lincoln Park, is in phase two of construction.

County Commissioner Thomas Davidson said that Summit is fortunate to have a developer that has cracked the code on making workforce housing work economically. Though O’Neil isn’t the only developer building workforce projects, Davidson said that he’s set the bar.

“His projects speak for themselves,” Davidson said. “He’s certainly one of the main players in the county.”

Building workforce housing became a passion project for O’Neil, who was first drawn to Summit County after working on a low-income development in Boulder called the Poplar Project. After doing research on which area in the state needed the most help with workforce housing, O’Neil set his sights on Breckenridge.

“I was thinking would it be possible for us to take the design and what we had learned at Poplar ... and come up here,” O’Neil said. “It was a very deliberate move with an idea, a vision. There was an intensity here, and it’s only gotten worse.”

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

O'Neil started the Wellington Neighborhood project in Breckenridge in 1999. When Brynn Grey first approached the project, O'Neil said the company was met with challenges from government entities such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the Colorado Division of Water Resources, as well as local governments within the county.

“The site was pretty challenged,” he said. “There were 40 different government agencies involved: federal level, state level, local level, and we’d go to meetings and they would all be there and everybody was pursuing their own agendas.”

Breckenridge Mayor Eric Mamula was part of the planning commission that helped to get Wellington off the ground. He said that shared goals between the town and O'Neil made it easier to get things done, but the various entities still have to sort out their differences.

“Everybody on every side of the discussion wants something,” Mamula said.

He said the Wellington project was the first large-scale project attempted in Breckenridge. It has since become a blueprint for creating future workforce housing in the town.

O'Neil's plan for Wellington brought all the different groups together. The neighborhood was awarded the National Award for Smart Growth Achievement from the EPA in 2002 for its use of old mining land. O'Neil was able to take that experience and bring it to his second development in Frisco, 10 years later, at Peak One.

When the town of Frisco first started thinking about construction for Peak One it put out a national call for developers. Of the 17 firms that applied, Brynn Grey was selected.

Peak One was given the 2016 Eagle Award from Housing Colorado. The award is given annually celebrating affordable housing projects in the state. The Frisco Town Council will hold an official presentation at their meeting on Dec. 13.

Both Wellington and Peak One sold out quickly (<http://www.summitdaily.com/news/business/friscos-peak-one-neighborhood-sold-out-before-completion/>). Wellington has 204 homes, and Peak One has 69. Lincoln Park is expected to have 78 homes once construction is completed. Phase one of the project has already sold out, and phase two is close behind. The next two phases will be completed next year.

COMMUNITY NEIGHBORHOODS

Meticulous planning is one of O'Neil's strengths. Each of his development projects has an intense amount of research put into planning to create what O'Neil calls “real neighborhoods with a sense of community.” He said that many communities with a lack of workforce housing try to solve the problem by adding more beds and parking spaces. O'Neil said that approach doesn't quite get at the root of the problem.

“These projects have a tendency to be soulless,” he said. “I've seen this so many times, we're going through planning commission ... and they'll go ‘this will be a great place for those people to live.’”

The difference, O'Neil said, is creating places that are desirable for anyone in the county, not just the workforce. He added that the quality of locals living in both the Peak One and Wellington neighborhoods has impacted both Frisco and Breckenridge in what the residents give back to the community.

“(Peak One) is a true locals neighborhood,” said Kate Clement, the director of marketing and operations for Peak One Brynn Grey. Clement has been working with Brynn Grey for six years. She started with the company after construction for Peak One started in 2010. As homeowners in the Peak One neighborhood, both Clement and Melissa Sherburne, a project manager with Brynn Grey, said that there’s a sense of community there that is difficult to replicate elsewhere.

“Even if I could afford to live anywhere, I would choose to live there. It’s a quality of life that hardly anybody has anymore. It’s just really amazing for our kids and for us,” Sherburne said.

THE SECRET SAUCE

O’Neil said that public-private partnerships are the “secret sauce” to solving the housing crisis. One entity can’t do all the work. For the Wellington Neighborhood in particular, O’Neil said that Mamula, who was on planning commission at the time, was crucial to the success of the project. O’Neil said that Mamula was the tie-breaking vote behind the controversial decision to start building.

“Eric Mamula has been the invisible hand behind the Wellington Neighborhood from day one,” O’Neil said.

Building trust between all parties is important for O’Neil when working on projects. On the town side, Frisco’s mayor, Gary Wilkinson, said that O’Neil’s experience building Wellington made the long process of developing Peak One a little smoother.

“He was very conscientious and transparent as a developer because he wanted to do it right,” Wilkinson said. “He had a very good understanding of what the demand is.”

Wilkinson said that the partnership played a crucial role in the success of Peak One and that Jocelyn Mills, the community development director at the time, put in a lot of work getting the neighborhood finalized.

“It wasn’t just the town council and David,” he said.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Transparency doesn’t end with town governments. O’Neil said that it is also important to be up front with potential residents of these neighborhoods. The company often works with prospective buyers from the early construction process until they move in to ensure any potential concerns or questions are addressed.

The passion and care for residents at the forefront of Brynn Grey’s developments are what originally drew Sherburne to the company.

“Not every development company is completely passionate about what they do, and I think you can really see that in the product,” she said. “I think that each of these developments contributes significantly back to the Summit County community.”

For O’Neil, the workforce housing crisis is not just about the economic impact of employees not being able to afford to live in Summit, it’s also about the future of the county.

“When you have locals leaving this community to go live somewhere else, you’ve got a real problem with preserving community character,” he said. “The community character is not about the mountains, it’s not about Vail Resorts, it’s about the individuals here: the small business people, the entrepreneurs, the first responders, ski shop owners. They’re what give Summit County its character and its life and what makes this place special.”