

April 2010

GeorgiaTrend

Fannin County



Master Craftsman: Bill Oyster, owner of Oyster Fine Bamboo Fly Rods in Blue Ridge

obtain a parcel of land that can then be developed into a location for new businesses.

The local real estate market is getting a boost with a \$75 million development on the Toccoa River called Blue Ridge Golf & River Club. This high-end gated community will provide Fannin with its first golf course.

"We have - God willing - nine holes that are going to be playable by summertime of this year," says June Slusser, who is marketing the community. "We would have been further along with that except for the rain."

The course lies along a mile stretch of the Toccoa and, true to its River Club name, will offer residents and guests opportunities for kayaking and rafting. About 42 of the 280 home sites have been sold, according to Slusser.

The ability of the well-financed project to get off the ground is a good omen for the rest of the real estate market. Over the last year a number of developers who purchased tracts of land for new subdivisions found themselves without buyers in a crowded market.

"This was a market that was largely built on second homes and retirement properties," explains Slusser. "Because people were not able to sell what they had in Florida or other parts of the country, they were not able to come here and buy."

Although it has not come roaring back, Slusser and others say the market hit bottom in Fannin County last summer and

since that time "each month there have been more closings than the same month in 2008."

The glut of homes on the market is finally starting to recede. There are 600 to 700 for sale now, compared to 900-plus at the same time last year, she says.

Downtown Uptick

Back in downtown Blue Ridge, local merchants are enjoying an upsurge in traffic and sales. Of course, this is a very different town than it was a few years ago when, as one local put it, "You could throw a ball down Main Street and never hit anybody."

Where there had been just a few antiques stores, there is considerably more variety. A recently passed beer and wine ordinance has spurred the opening of several new restaurants, as well as a microbrewery.

That's good for tourism, and most businesses attribute as much as 70 percent of their business to out-of-towners, says Lynda Thompson.

"The locals come downtown, but not mainly to shop," she explains. "It is really touristy. We have the train, and people come and ride it, and then they go shopping around; but if we did not have our tourists, I think we would be in trouble."

Thompson's own business, L&L Beanery, is doing well and has expanded with a café and bakery next door. As the town's only coffee shop, it's become a gathering spot. Amid the overstuffed sofas and comfortable chairs, many an entrepreneur can be found hunched over a laptop while nursing a cup of joe. It's also a meeting place for local church groups and clubs, and more than a little business sometimes gets done at the tables.

"Downtown Blue Ridge didn't have a place that people could go and meet their friends and talk," she explains.

Thompson herself is an example of the corporate refugees who migrated here to follow their own small-town dreams. While working at the corporate offices of WebMD in Florida, she visited friends here in town.

"One time when we were up here and were downtown, I saw that they were renovating this old bank," she recalls. "It had been built in 1926 and still had the original vault. I just thought it would make a good coffee shop."

At the time she was not yet ready to give up the corporate life, so the actual running of the shop fell to local friends. That arrangement worked for all of two months before she got a call from her friend's husband saying that his wife was "having a nervous breakdown and could not handle it."

Thompson flew back and forth for the next year, keeping