A new way to preserve West Virginia’s beauty

Story by Audrey Hoffer
Photos by Bonnie Jo Mount
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ERRARDSTOWN, W.Va. — The first thing you see at the entrance gate to the rolling farmland of Broomgrass is a sign for honeybees and the barn.
Down the gravel road is the mobile sheep pen, with four ewes — Pansy, Bertha, Myrtle and GiGi — surrounded by the seven lambs born in April.

Then it’s just grass and fields framed by forest as far as you can see. Residents’ houses are hidden in the folds of the land. And there are two houses for eggs, with hundreds of chickens, five moveable shelters for meat chickens and turkeys, nine pigs over the hill and 24 cows grazing in pasture. Mostly, the landscape is open.

This is Broomgrass — a “new farm community prototype” aimed at restricting development — in Berkeley County, the rural eastern panhandle of West Virginia, two hours west of the District. It’s located in the view shed of the 23,000-acre Sleepy Creek Wildlife Management
Area and is adjacent to the 60-acre Audubon Wildlife Sanctuary across Back Creek.

Three hundred and twenty acres — half wooded and half fields, including an organic produce and animal farm and 16 one-acre home sites, make up the community. Eleven families, whose members range from age 8 to 67, own one-acre lots. Five lots are for sale.

What you get as a resident is more than a beautiful place to live in the country. “You are also a one-sixteenth owner of the 320-acre property, which was placed in a farmland protection program preventing future development,” said Matthew Grove, co-founder of the community with his wife, Lisa Dall’Olio. “There’ll never be more than 16 homes, and the land will be forever wild.”

[They wanted to “do something cool” for their Va. vacation home. So they got a silo.]
Broomgrass is a new farm community prototype aimed at restricting development in Berkeley County, the rural eastern panhandle of West Virginia, two hours west of the District. Eleven families own one-acre lots. Top right, Meg Kinghorn, who moved to Broomgrass from Takoma Park, Md., three years ago, gardens in her yard. Above, Robbie Babbitt, president of the community association, carries water to his Katahdin sheep.

“It’s like living in a state park,” said Casey Willson, a resident with his wife, Meg Kinghorn, for three years, who proudly declared, “I’m the oldest
“We had no intention of moving,” Willson said. “Our house in Takoma Park, Maryland, was paid off. We had a cabin in Hampshire County, West Virginia. But a friend of Meg told her about the community, and we were in Berkeley Springs and thought, ‘Broomgrass isn’t far away. Why don’t we go look it up?’ ”

At that first visit, “we just looked at each other and nodded our heads,” he recalled. They returned the next month and selected a lot.

“Broomgrass was born in response to a question: Can we create a model community that saves the family farm while developing it lightly?” Grove said.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a mass sell-off of family farms, and developments were popping up. “Low-interest loans and no-credit-required kicked this sprawl into high gear,” Grove said. “It was unsettling to us. I grew up in Berkeley County and was pretty resident.”
disturbed to see the rural countryside going away. We wanted to do something about this ‘taking’ of farmland.”

“We were terrified it could fall victim to development,” Dall’Olio said.

They lived in New York City but returned to Martinsburg to open an architectural practice.

Three families, including Grove’s, jointly owned the Broomgrass land. A neighboring farmer was farming it.

“We brainstormed how to keep the farm going, prevent development and live there. We spent a year
developing our ideas for a new farm community prototype. Then we bought out the other owners,” Grove said.

They knew they couldn’t do it all themselves, he said. “We thought, ‘If one family can’t maintain the typical American farm — which is, on average, 300 acres —maybe multiple families can.”
They came up with the idea of limiting the number of houses and the lot size, keeping most of the woodland and fields in ‘common’ and providing residents the opportunity to farm the common land.

They learned about a federal farmland protection program administered through the county that had recently been established. They submitted an application for a Broomgrass conservation easement. “I got the application,” said Lavonne Paden, executive director of the Berkeley County Farmland Protection program in 2004.

A conservation easement is a way to conserve property in a natural state by permanently restricting development. It also prevents other government entities from enforcing the right of eminent domain for structures such as power lines. And it provides some financial compensation to the owners for the limits on development.
West Virginia has 215 farmland easements over 20,000 acres, and Berkeley County has 53, covering 5,166 acres, said F. Mark Schiavone, executive director of the Berkeley County Farmland Protection Board.

In 2005, the Berkeley County Farmland Protection Board and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service approved Dall’Olio and Grove’s easement application.

With that money and a commercial loan, they improved the property (roads, utilities, fencing, storm water retention); built amenities (a barn and pool); delineated 16 house sites (the farmland protection program allowed one home per 20 acres); and began selling lots. They designed their house, Willson and Kinghorn’s, and three others.
Sadie Yates, 9, hugs one of the chickens that her family raises. Katahdin sheep graze in a field. Swine roam a pasture. The chickens, sheep, cows and hogs are free-range and moved practically daily.

“Then we ended the founder period and turned management over to the Broomgrass Community Association. Now we’re just members like everyone else,” Dall’Olio said.
Timothy Yates made the decision to join the sustainable farming movement. He was at the conference table with Dall’Olio and Grove brainstorming the creation of Broomgrass. He gave up a profession of architecture and a position as architect in Grove & Dall’Olio Architects to start a new business, Steel House Farm. “I own and run a farm in Broomgrass. It’s not a communal farm. But it’s on the common land,” he said.

Yates farms and raises pastured livestock. He sells chicken, beef, pork, lamb and eggs that are often laid the morning they’re sold.

Rob Babbitt, president of the community association, raises the sheep and has a vegetable garden on the common land for personal use. Yates and Babbitt care for each other’s livestock when one goes on vacation.

“We manage the land by rotational grazing, which is good for the soil,” Babbitt said.
“By building soil, we’re sequestering carbon, which is good for the environment. Management intensive grazing also helps retain more water on the land, thereby reducing erosion and runoff to the Chesapeake Bay,” Yates added.

The chickens, sheep, cows and hogs are free-range and moved practically daily. The chicken houses are on wheels. “I come first thing in the
morning, hook the house up to my tractor and move it so they have fresh grass,” Yates said. “You can see the spots where they grazed because the grass is greener and thicker.” The chicken houses have a netting floor, so the waste fertilizes the ground below.

[Quiet luxury by the water in the Palmetto State]

Every January, the Farm Committee reviews all projects proposed by lot owners who want to use the common land. The committee presents the proposals to the entire community for approval.

Among the association’s guidelines are construction requirements for houses. They include: internal heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems; energy efficient systems that surpass state code; a prohibition against vinyl siding or brick; and a size from 1,200 to 5,000 square feet. “We don’t want manor houses or Gothic mansions. We want informal, site-specific designed homes,” Grove said.
The salt water community swimming pool offers views of the valley and mountains in four states – West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

The white oak timber frame bank barn is built into a hill, meaning you can drive a tractor in on two levels. “It’s designed to mimic a traditional timber frame barn. When the Dutch and Germans settled here, this is the kind of barn they built,” Yates said.
A tractor is available for communal or personal use. Attachments include a wood splitter; a forklift; a front loader to pick up gravel or a big delivery of mulch; a snowplow; and a mower for bush hogging the fields, a fancy description for mowing.

The pool is high up so that it offers views of the valley and mountains in four states — West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania. The poolhouse includes a hot tub, sauna, outdoor kitchen and lounging area under the shade of a shed roof topped with solar panels that heat the 25-meter pool water.

There are miles of trails to walk, bike, cross-country ski or snowshoe. The
property has a crescent border on one end with 1.6 miles of frontage along Back Creek, “so you can put your boat in on one end and kayak to the other end,” Dall’Olio said.

“For us, Broomgrass is a confluence of everything we love,” she said.

Credits: Story by Audrey Hoffer. Photos by Bonnie Jo Mount. Designed by Dwuan June. Photo Editing by Thomas Simonetti.