

Cockerham...from Page 1A

from the Historic Union County Courthouse – from the roof to the bricking to the arched windows, the new building by Goodspeed Architects Inc. will look very much like it's been there all along.

"I hope that the town is as proud of the finished product as I am of the concept," said Cockerham. "When it's built now, people are going to know that's a modern-day building."

"What I'm hoping is that, in 20 or 30 years, people will wonder if those two were built at the same time."

Many people know Cockerham as the former owner of the Zaxby's restaurant here in Blairsville, though prior to opening the Zaxby's, he worked as chief credit officer for United Community Bank for more than a decade.

He ran Zaxby's for about 13 years, and two years ago, he sold it and bought some vacation rental cabins that he continues to co-manage with his Administrative Assistant Olivia Wilkinson at Cockerham Capital.

It was also about two years ago that W.C. Nelson and Paul Thompson of the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority Board, along with Mayor Jim Conley, approached Cockerham with an offer he couldn't refuse.

"They had this vision of this three-story building, with two stories being a ground-level retail and then residential on top, and I really liked that idea," said Cockerham. "They committed to me that, if I would build the building, they would build a paved parking lot behind it."



Olivia Wilkinson and Steve Cockerham of Cockerham Capital.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Added Cockerham, "The retail will be rental, and we're going to sell the condos on the top floor, so it's really a mixed-use (development)."

The lot upon which the building will sit – next to the Historic Haralson/Carr Law Office and across from Foodland Grocery – is one of four parcels originally for sale by the Blairsville DDA as part of the Haralson Property Development.

After spending about a year negotiating a price for the lot, then going through an initial design process, Cockerham contacted his friend David Goodspeed to come up with the design as it exists today.

"We told him that we wanted to incorporate as much of the existing downtown as we could and use the courthouse as a reflecting point of what we were trying to do," said Cockerham. "And I think he did a beautiful job with it."

Cockerham hopes

that construction can begin sometime in the next four to six weeks, weather pending, at which point the DDA will start on the new parking lot behind the property.

The paved parking area will likely feature 90 parking spaces, though Cockerham's property will have eight dedicated spots for the residents of his new building.

It's too early for applicants on either the residential or the retail side of the development, but Cockerham has already spoken with several prospective candidates for the building, with interests ranging from retail to dining to office-use.

On the residential side, Cockerham said he was thankful for Wilkinson's design contributions toward the condo living spaces.

As far as working with the DDA and the city to bring the project to life, Cockerham said that DDA Program Manager Darren Harper, the DDA Board, Mayor Conley and the Blairsville City Council have all done a great job in making the process as seamless as possible.

When all is said and done, the new building and parking area will be a surefire economic boon for the entire area, adding not only to the walkability of Downtown Blairsville but also to the number of retail options to draw people into the county.

"Projects like Steve's are a perfect example of how public/private partnerships can directly benefit the community as a whole," said Harper.

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