

# Northern Colorado BUSINESS REPORT

11/19/2010 - 11:15:20 AM

## Union Place plans to go modular next spring

By Steve Porter

FORT COLLINS - The developer of a sustainable mixed-use community in north Fort Collins said she's scrapping her original construction plan and will instead pre-build the homes in a factory near Boulder.



*Steve Porter, Northern Colorado Business Report*

**WAITING FOR SPRING** – Union Place, an 80-plus-unit, mixed-use development proposed near the intersection of North College and Willox Lane, has been delayed by the economy but its developer says a modular-built community will rise up next spring.

Berthoud-based developer Donna Merten, owner of Merten Inc., said the ongoing uncertainty

of the economy and slump in the home-buying sector prompted her to rethink how she wanted to develop the 89-unit Union Place, near the southwest intersection of North College Avenue and Willox Lane.

Merten said instead of the usual stick-frame construction of one or two houses at a time, Union Place will rise up all at once next spring.

"We're planning to do the entire neighborhood in one shot rather than parts and pieces," she said. "It's a whole new concept than what people are used to."

Union Place broke ground in October 2009 and was expected to start building homes this year. But the project has been quiet for the last few months after most of the initial infrastructure was completed.

The project is in line to receive \$2.2 million in funding for project-related public improvements from the Fort Collins Urban Renewal Authority, which was set up to aid development in the city's north end.

Christina Vincent, URA planner, said the city has not yet made any payments to Merten but still expects the project to come to fruition.

"She's been spending her own money with hopes of getting paid back in the future," Vincent said. "As far as the city is concerned, the project is still viable and still going forward."

### **Green showcase**

Merten said she wants Union Place to be a showcase of green and sustainable construction methods. The development will include a variety of housing types, including single-family, condos and lofts over a 19,500-square-foot commercial strip planned to line Willox Lane on the project's north side.

Central to the project is a geothermal system that will tap underground energy for both heating and cooling of all residential units.

"The geothermal is already in, and when we move in we can plug right into it," she said. "We're hoping to do solar across the system, too, so we can run the geothermal with solar instead of (standard) electricity."

Merten said her plan is to have all of the residential units pre-built in a modular factory in the Boulder area. "We'll be building all the components in a local factory," she said. "Then we'll put in the foundations and we'll come out in trucks and put it together."

Merten Inc., a design-build company founded in 2006, will do all of the architectural design and construction of the units.

"We're going to start in the spring," she said. "We have everything through the process. It's all permit-ready for the lots."

Merten said the economic slowdown made it impossible to get started building any homes this year, and she doesn't want to build over the winter. Taking a break gives the project a chance to take a different tack, she said.

"It made no sense to build during the winter if we didn't have to because it's more expensive," she said. "We're trying to do it as economically as possible, so going modular made sense."

The Union Place homes have always been aimed at lower-income residents, and Merten said they will range from the \$220s and below.

Merten said another factor that caused her to reevaluate her project was a desire to hold onto control of the development rather than letting independent builders come in.

"I want control over the whole neighborhood to make sure it's built to our high sustainability standards," she said.

Merten, who recently traveled to Florida to talk about Union Place at a renewable energy conference, said she believes it will be a model development for the future.

"Everybody's going to be looking to this template for future construction - there's nothing standard about it," she said with a laugh. "If we can do it on 10 acres, we can do it on 100 or 1,000. I think at the end it's going to be pretty amazing."