

A Village Concept: An Alternative Development Proposal for the Montreat Conference Center

by members of the Montreat community
September 2021



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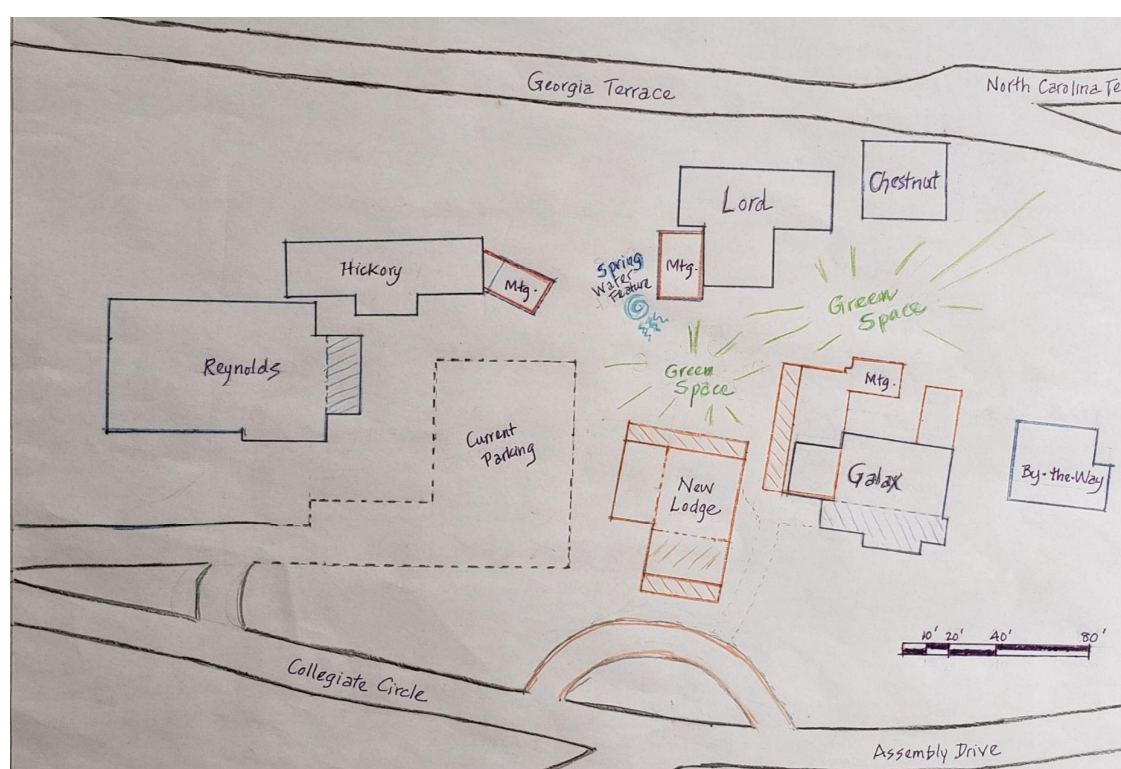
The Montreat Conference Center (MRA) has proposed a large new structure for accommodation and meeting space on the property where Galax House, Chestnut Lodge, and the Lord Apartments now sit. Their proposal includes the demolition of these three existing lodges, and destruction of 59 mature trees on the property.

Members of the community have proposed an alternative approach, a Village Concept. The MRA recently responded by rejecting this alternative. However, there are several assertions in their analysis that appear to be incorrect. We are ready to communicate with the MRA further, but the MRA has officially and explicitly closed the door to any further dialogue with those who seek an alternative. They have submitted a permit application to the Town of Montreat for their original proposal, which is tentatively scheduled to be considered by the Board of Adjustment on Sept. 23.

We urge you to consider the below ideas, to study the comparative chart, and to think through how you envision the future of Montreat. Make your voice heard to protect Montreat.

The 'Village Concept' in brief

- ◆ Restore historic lodges
- ◆ Prioritize green space
- ◆ Save dozens of mature trees
- ◆ Affordable housing for small churches
- ◆ Accessible space in all lodges
- ◆ Meeting rooms surrounded by nature
- ◆ Expand Galax House
- ◆ Add a new small lodge



Orange indicates new construction

Key Features

- **Preserve Historic Lodges:** Chestnut Lodge and the Lord Apartments -- the oldest home in Montreat -- would be fully restored. Adding private half or full baths would be possible in many of the rooms.
- **Expand Galax:** A two-story addition onto the West side and back of Galax would provide nine bedrooms with private bathrooms, and an expanded dining room would accommodate more guests. Several of these rooms could be rented individually, separate from the rest of Galax. A large meeting room at the back could be accessible from any of the lodges.
- **New Lodge:** This would include ten bedrooms with private baths; kitchen and ample meeting rooms. It would be fully ADA accessible, with porches overlooking front and back.
- **Connecting green space:** Newly-landscaped green space would be close to 17,000 sq ft, stretching from the middle commons to the area south and east of Chestnut Lodge. In addition, 8,000 sq ft of currently wooded space would be preserved. We envision paths and benches in part of these wooded areas. The spring that runs next to the Lord Apartments could be an attractive water feature.
- **Meeting rooms:** Generous meeting space would be provided. These meeting spaces are more flexible than the MRA model: some are embedded in the lodges and several are accessible independently. Three meeting rooms would be surrounded by natural green spaces (see images below). The common spaces outdoors would also accommodate many small and large outdoor meetings. Finally, the four buildings would have ample covered porches, furnished in an attractive manner that facilitates informal meetings and gatherings.
- **Parking:** Because the renovated lodges do not add bedrooms, the zoning ordinance requires fewer new parking spaces. We have provided a detailed proposal to satisfy parking requirements. This does not include an underground parking garage.



The advantages of the village model are many:

- This approach honors history by preserving the oldest home in Montreat, where the Presbyterian Church started in Montreat.
- The overall look, size and character of the four buildings are much more suited to the area.
- It retains the affordable lodges for visitors (especially Chestnut), thus keeping Montreat open to all, including small churches.
- Preserves a “Montreat, mountain feel” in the varied lodges, avoiding a generic hotel-room feel.
- Avoids deep drilling into rock for the MRA’s intended underground parking garage.
- Environmental risks are significantly reduced: most trees would be preserved, ensuring shade and reducing erosion. Less drilling minimizes risk of damage to Flat Creek during construction.
- Mitigates impact on community: less drilling, more tree canopy, dispersed traffic flow.
- Estimated construction costs are half that of the MRA model.



In short: The size and character of the buildings; the ample, inviting green spaces; the preservation of historic lodges – this model meets the MRA’s stated needs while offering Montreat an exciting vision that could bring together the community in widespread support.

“While no project is straightforward, PSABC is confident that the Lord Apartments and Chestnut Lodge could be rehabilitated without undue burden to the MRA... [These buildings] represent an irreplaceable connection to the beginnings of Montreat.”

- Preservation Society of Asheville & Buncombe County (PSABC)

Comparative Chart

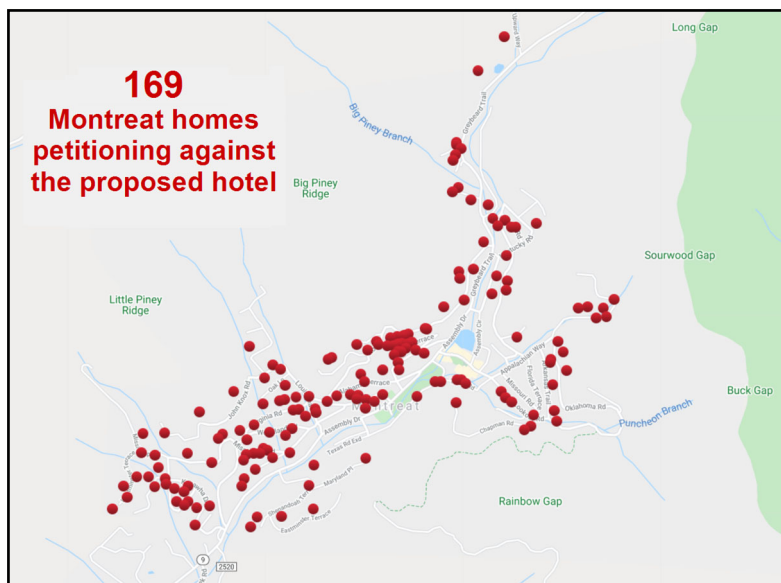
The box below sets out a large and a moderate version of this village concept.¹ The sketch shows the footprint of the larger version.

	MRA Model	Village (large)	Village (moderate)
Number of bedrooms	40 (uniform size)	40-42 (varying sizes, more flexible)	34-36
Rooms with private baths	40	30-35 (some half-baths)	24-29
Number of beds	80	79	67
New meeting rooms	6 (1 large)	5-7 (1-3 large)	4-6
Suites with private kitchen	0	7 (Lord 5 + Galax 2)	7
Porches	2	10	10
Trees to be cut down	59	10-12	8-10
Wooded area retained	0	1/5 acre (8,000 sq ft)	1/4 acre (11,000 sq ft)
Newly-landscaped green space	unspecified	2/5 acre (17,000 sq ft)	3/5 acre (26,000 sq ft)
Estimated construction cost	\$12-20 million	\$6-7 million	\$5.5-7 million

How did the MRA respond?

The above proposal was shared with the MRA in July. They responded several weeks later by saying that they would not move away from their original plan. In their response, they made no analysis of any of the benefits of the Village Concept, and refused to discuss any version of it further. The MRA stated that their 40,000-square-foot structure provides better “community fit and compatibility” for Montreat. We could not disagree more strongly. In addition:

- A number of the key claims on which they base their objections, specifically regarding construction and parking requirements, do not appear to be correct based on our recent consultations with Montreat officials.
- Two (and perhaps three) of the properties slated to be torn down qualify for designation as local historic landmarks. This would allow variance in rehabilitation requirements. The MRA has repeatedly stated that they are not interested in the historic value of these properties, and they have given no attention to the possibilities that such historic preservation could provide.
- The MRA’s architecture firm, Samsel Architects, seems to have gone out of their way to frame the Village Concept in the most negative possible light. Regrettably, as many have noted, this was not a neutral assessment.
- If the MRA is serious, they would allow a truly independent assessment that considers how an alternative might be crafted that would carry the support of the community. **We stand by our proposal.**



What you can do

If you are concerned, now is the time to act:

- ♦ Write to the MRA. Talk to your neighbors. Speak with your elected representatives on the Town Council.
- ♦ Sign the petition, request yard signs and donate to support opposition to the MRA’s plan at montreat-stewards.org.
- ♦ Attend the Board of Adjustment hearing, tentatively scheduled for Sept. 23, where the MRA’s permit application will be considered.
- ♦ Contact us at montreatstewards@gmail.com to discuss further.

¹ The moderate version would reduce the new lodge by 2 bedrooms and one meeting room, preserving more trees and wooded area; and would add 5 rather than 9 bedrooms to Galax, leaving more outdoor commons space.