



PRESS PHOTO/REX LARSEN

A future: David Allen looks at the Uptown Village construction site at Wealthy Street and Diamond Avenue SE in Grand Rapids. The development will combine commercial space and low-income rental housing.

New project aims to keep housing affordable

Developer wants longtime residents to be able to stay in their neighborhood

BY JIM HARGER
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS —The new town houses and commercial building going up along Wealthy and Sigsbee streets seem like an obvious sign gentrification has arrived on the city's near Southeast Side.

But Uptown Village is being built for the opposite reason, said David Allen, executive director of Lighthouse Communities.

The 24 apartments and town houses are being built as low-income housing to ensure longtime residents won't be forced out of the neighborhood by rising home prices, said Allen, whose nonprofit housing group is one of the project's developers.

"All the apartments in the development will be low-income for the next 30 years," Allen said. "That's so it doesn't gentrify. That's the point of the whole project."

During the past decade, the North Baxter and East Hills neighborhoods that surround Uptown Village have seen housing prices increase at double-digit rates nearly every year.

Absentee landlords are selling, and young home buyers are moving back into the city, Allen said. That's all good except for low-income residents who want to stay in the neighborhood.

"We see this as a really hot neigh-

borhood," Allen said. "But there are a lot of people who have lived there for 40 or 50 years. It would be a travesty if they couldn't afford to live here anymore."

The town houses should be completed by January. The three-story building along Wealthy Street should be completed by July, Allen said.

The six three-bedroom, two-bath town houses along Sigsbee Street SE will rent for \$715 a month. The 18 two- and three-bedroom apartments on the second and third floors of the Wealthy Street building will rent for \$550 and \$695 a month, Allen said.

Four of the six ground-floor storefronts along Wealthy Street are in the final stages of being leased for retail uses, Allen said. Greenspace and parking will fill the space between the town houses and the Wealthy Street building.

The \$5 million project is being financed mainly through tax credits that are being syndicated through the Great Lakes Capital Fund.

Lighthouse and its partner, Bradford Mathis, formed Midwest Housing Development LLC to acquire the one-acre site, which included an abandoned auto repair shop along Wealthy Street and five abandoned houses facing Sigsbee Street and Diamond Avenue.

"It would be a travesty if they couldn't afford to live here anymore."

— David Allen, developer



PRESS GRAPHIC/NAJCY JONESFRANCIS

Although the site was underused and blighted, buying the land was one of their biggest hurdles, Allen said.

The previous landowner was determined to make a large profit, he said. "We finally liberated the land and paid the ransom," he said.

Rachel Lee, a real estate associate who works across the street at Bazani Associates, said Uptown Village bodes well for the neighborhood.

"The more storefronts on the street with people living above, the more sustainable the street is going to be," Lee said. "That building is really going to anchor the southwest corner."

The low-income housing also will add diversity to the rapidly changing neighborhood, Lee said.

The "zero-setback" retail stores along Wealthy Street also are going to help the revival. "To me, it adds more excitement to what's going on in the area as a whole."

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