

Seeds of renewal in Oliver

WITH NEW HOUSES, RESIDENTS AND ACTIVISTS AIM TO WEED OUT DEALERS, PULL IN FAMILIES

From *Sun Reporter* on Friday May 7, 2008

By Stephen Kiehl



A crowd gathered yesterday afternoon on the crumbling steps of a boarded-up rowhouse in East Baltimore. Their attention focused across the street, where construction workers using an 80-foot crane were assembling the first new houses in the Oliver neighborhood in half a century.

The people had never seen such a sight - not here, not in this blighted community where one survey puts the vacancy rate at 44 percent and where drugs and crime have chased out most of the middle class. Construction of new townhouses happens along the waterfront, these people said, not in Oliver.

"It's gonna enhance the neighborhood tremendously," said Earl Carpenter, 66, a handyman who has lived in Oliver for 15 years. "The more responsible people in the neighborhood, the less of the hoodlums we'll have."

This week the first five of 122 new or rehabbed homes planned for Oliver are being built using modular construction - meaning each floor is assembled in a factory, trucked into the city and then set in place on site. It also means that in a depressed community where entire blocks have been abandoned, the landscape will change virtually overnight.

"It's instant impact," said Rob English, lead organizer for the social action group BUILD, which is leading the effort to construct the homes. "It's a radical transformation for the Oliver community and the people living here."

All of the houses, to be sold to single-family homeowners, will be built in a six-square-block area just north of Johns Hopkins Hospital and the new east-side biopark. Oliver, with its tree-lined streets, hopes to build on the success of that development. By concentrating the new homes in the core of the neighborhood, residents hope the renewal will spread outward to take in all of Oliver.

Once a solidly middle-class community of teachers, nurses and police officers, Oliver - like so many city neighborhoods - saw its core residents flee for the suburbs and drug dealers move in. Oliver hit bottom in 2002, when a firebombing killed seven members of the Dawson family, who had battled the dealers on their block.

Galvanized by the tragedy, the historic churches and activists in the neighborhood drew up a plan to rebuild Oliver. They raised thousands of dollars to acquire vacant houses and assemble land for new development. They cleaned up the streets and flushed out the drug dealers - for the most part.

Now they are witnessing the most tangible sign of those years of work. The first five houses are on North Caroline Street, three-story, three-bedroom homes with unfinished basements that will sell for \$139,000. Two houses were set in place yesterday; two more will be set today, and the final one tomorrow in an event with Mayor Sheila Dixon.

The houses still need to be hooked up to utilities and have bricks laid on the facades. They should be completely finished by June, when work will start on another five new houses. Yesterday, construction workers gingerly stacked the floors - each 16 feet wide by 35 feet deep by about 10 feet high.

“Push it back!” a worker standing on the dirt lot shouted to a crane operator lowering the second floor of one of the houses. Workers directed the huge wooden box with ropes and bare hands.

“Is it good?” the crane operator yelled back, after making some adjustments.

“We’re good.”

Each floor was constructed in a factory in Middleburg, Pa., by Custom Building Systems LLC and driven down Interstate 83 on double-wide trailers. The modular construction allows for homes that are built stronger and more efficiently, the developer said, and it also saves money and time.

“People coming home this evening will see these homes up,” said project manager Courtney League. “This is something tangible.”

The homes are being built and sold by Philadelphia-based TRF Development Partners, a nonprofit that specializes in reviving inner-city neighborhoods. The company raised the \$10 million in capital needed to get the project started, promising investors a 2 percent return. The Oliver project will include 75 new homes, selling for about \$139,000 each, and 47 rehabbed homes at about \$99,000 each. So far, TRF is close to contracts on three of the first five houses.

“We were showing people a dirt lot, and they were willing to buy and excited about the price,” said Sean Closkey, president of TRF, which he said identified a need for quality family housing in the region priced under \$250,000. “We think we’ve found a place where people want to live and a price that people are actively looking at housing at.”

Adrienne Kelly, 34, a stay-at-home mom who has lived in Oliver most of her life, said she would like to buy one of the new houses. She now lives with her 2-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter in a rental house.

“With what we’re dealing with right now, I love change,” Kelly said. She said the new homes will give children in the neighborhood hope. “They need to see new things. They need to see a building up of the community.”

For years, Oliver has only deteriorated. Many blocks have just one or two occupied houses. The median household income for the Greenmount East area, which includes Oliver, is \$18,721, and 47 percent of the working-age population is not employed or seeking work, according to the U.S. Census.

But given its prime location near Hopkins and its history of activism and strong churches, Oliver is also primed for revival. The city is trying to help it along. The Department of Housing and Community Development has kicked in \$1.55 million to help acquire property and clear the land and \$1.65 million to subsidize the construction of the homes themselves to keep the costs down.

“This is really the beginning of a major transformation and revitalization of the community,” said city Housing Commissioner Paul T. Graziano.

One afternoon this week, a drug crew could be seen on a corner of East Preston Street, sitting on a stoop waiting for customers. The other crews have been run out of the area, and those last holdouts will soon be gone, too, activists said.

“It used to be an all-drug area,” said Angelo Elliott, 46, who lives just a few doors down from the new homes. “But those boys have been rolling out, and it’s getting better and better.”