
Once derelict apartment complex becomes quiet refuge for Memphis seniors

By David Flaum

Tuesday, April 29, 2008

A year and a half ago, the 18-unit, one-level apartment building just north of the abandoned railroad tracks crossing Tillman was a blight, a slum.

"I wouldn't live down here rent free," said Lawrence Bonds, a retired state highway road worker.

Now he does -- and pays rent.

That is because 17 months ago, the Binghamton Development Corp. and the Church Health Center combined forces to purchase and renovate what used to be called "Bolognaland" or the "Hole" by neighbors.

It is now Hope Community Apartments.

The development group operates the building, and the center screens tenants and provides social services to them.

"There was crime and drug trafficking," said Robert Montague, executive director of the Binghamton community development agency. "Residents were living there without utilities, there were animals chained to porches. People were living in inhuman conditions."

That's changed with the \$400,000 investment put into renovating the building and starting to turn the 1 1/3 -acre parcel between the apartments and the tracks into a park.

Bonds, 72, and his mother, Lillian Terry, rented an apartment in the complex for people 55 years old or more.

"I like the neighborhood," said Bonds, who moved in in November after a fire damaged the house he and his mother rented on Princeton.

"The neighbors are quiet," he said. "You don't have the little dope boys running all over like they used to."

For Rosie Davis, the apartments were a perfect place to live as she returned to her hometown from St. Louis.

Davis, 62, said her sister sent her a flier for the apartments, and the retired licensed practical nurse decided one was for her.

She moved in April 18.

"I got off the bus and went into my apartment," Davis said. "It's nice, quiet and peaceful. It's what I expected."

So far, 14 of the 18 units are occupied, with six applicants in line for the other four, said Steve Houlihan, property manager.

Rent is \$300 a month plus utilities for each of the 430-square-foot, one-bedroom units.

For the community development agency, a top priority is decent, affordable housing in the area, Montague said.

Much of its effort has been to renovate dilapidated homes or build new ones on vacant lots.

"There is a large population of seniors in the area who are vulnerable to housing conditions and predatory loans and need a hand," Montague said. "Blight was an issue for all the longtime residents (of Binghamton), particularly at this property."

Church Health Center officials have a great interest in decent, affordable rental housing. People from the two agencies move in some of the same nonprofit circles, which brought them together.

The CHC was looking for ways to renovate apartments in the inner city to provide affordable places to live through a nonprofit structure, said Dr. Scott Morris, director of the center.

"You take out profit to drive rents down so working-class people could be more likely to afford it," he said.

And, that fit with the center's mission of providing health care to people, mostly working folks, who can't afford it.

"We always felt issues of health care go far beyond just giving people pills," Morris said. "We see people every day with diseases they get because they live in inadequate housing."

The Binghamton agency and the center decided to start with seniors because they're more stable as tenants, Morris said.

"They're not moving every year or two," he said. "They're committed to living in a community setting."

Part of that setting is the park next to Hope apartments, bought with money from the R. Brad Martin family and grants from the state and city.

The now-level area includes a garden plot, walking path and picnic area. With the former CSX rail right-of-way planned to be a greenway, the park could be a stop along the way, Montague said.

If the groups can find support and property at an attractive price, they'll try to do it again.

"We'll just have to see what opportunities arise," Montague said.

Contact David Flaum at 529-2330.

Hope Community Apartments

Address: 219 Tillman

Developers: Binghamton Development Corp., Church Health Center.

Rental units: 18 one-bedroom apartments for people 55 years old or older.

Monthly rent: \$300 plus utilities.

Size: 430 square feet.

Features: Living room, kitchen with appliances provided, bath, two closets, central air and heat.

Phone: 272-0010, ext. 1154.



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