After demolition, a neighborhood reborn

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Benny Price sat on his porch overlooking the leafy Bancroft Parkway on a summer afternoon, recalling the time a tree in the front yard fell onto the brick facade.

The building held, a testament to the rock-solid sturdiness of the rental housing that lines the parkway and spills over for blocks. The housing remains strong after more than a century of providing shelter for Price and untold thousands of Wilmington's working class.

"Hopefully," Price said, "the ones that they rebuild or redo are just as rugged as these."

Price, a 62-year-old retired St. Francis Hospital housekeeping employee, was talking about the Woodlawn Trustees' ambitious plan to level an entire community of rental properties that stretches across 10.5 acres of the Flats. The project could cost more than $100 million, with 450 units scheduled to be built in place of the demolished structures.

The proposal promises a seminal moment for a neighborhood that dates back more than 100 years, and attention for a lesser-known west side community that's tucked between the stately homes of Wawaset Park and Little Italy - known for its ethnic restaurants and annual Italian Festival.

The development plan would remake a slice of Wilmington and preserve for another century neighborhood founder William Bancroft's vision of quality housing for people of modest means. Others hope the project will spark economic development along nearby Lincoln and Union streets, where businesses already are working to attract attention.

It is an extraordinary plan, the type of project that some argue could draw people back to Delaware's largest city, which has seen its population shrink over the past decade.

"It's the best thing that's happened in this city in the last 100 years," said Luigi Vitrone, the owner of the nearby Pastabilities restaurant and president of the Little Italy Neighborhood Association.

'Ancient buildings'

Built for a time of gas lighting and horse ties instead of central air and off-street parking, the rentals in the Flats have steep staircases, cramped bathrooms and no insulation -- an energy-efficiency dilemma that has increased utility expenses for residents and pushed the cost of the apartments out of the affordable range.

A predominantly black and Hispanic community of about 1,100 people, the neighborhood is quiet during summer days, the kind of place where children have footraces on the streets and moms hang freshly washed laundry on backyard lines. But by late 2015 or early 2016, when ground could break on the rebuilding project, the Flats could become the focus of noisy, chaotic construction activity.

Woodlawn Trustees cleared the first public hurdle Thursday after the Design Review and Preservation Commission approved plans to demolish the homes to make way for new ones.

The Woodlawn Trustees plan to demolish the buildings in seven phases over the next 12 years and move affected tenants to vacant properties within the Flats and then relocating them again.

When residents move into the new apartments, they’ll find the same brick exterior, homey front porches and balconies, a nod to the past with a contemporary look. Inside, the new, more spacious rental units will offer central air, larger bathrooms and insulation.

Even Price, who keeps a record player and short-wave radio in his living room, knows time has caught up to the apartments.

"These are ancient buildings," he said.

Price’s largest room is his kitchen. It’s attached to the smallest room in his two-bedroom home, a closet-sized bathroom with a tub too tiny for even his average frame.

Jerome Saunders moved into his Bancroft Parkway home 15 years ago.

"The front part of our home is so cold in the wintertime that we have to use an electrical blanket in order to stay in that room, even with the heat on," he said.

Kevin Wilson, the project’s architect, believes the Flats redevelopment represents a crucial venture as communities and towns are developed far from sewer, water and other infrastructure. The Flats is already a livable community with nearby services, pedestrian-friendly streets and access to mass transit. But it lacks the modern amenities people expect, he said.

"From an architect’s standpoint, the city needs this sort of project because it needs to bring people back in," Wilson said. "And these neighborhoods are ripe for development."

Parking a boon

Tenants in the Flats park their cars along Bancroft Parkway, and often take spaces along Union Street, home to businesses that need customer parking.

Matthew Curtis owns Union City Grille, a Union Street steakhouse in front of the Flats. His customers often complain about scarce parking, a situation exacerbated by snow and the perception that Wilmington is unsafe to walk.

Curtis hopes the planned development isn’t just a pipe dream, mainly because 391 off-street parking spaces are promised.

"For all of us who own our businesses, own the buildings, I think it would be a huge, huge upside. It’s simple math," Curtis said.

Vitrone has lobbied four mayoral administrations for more parking and hopes the problem will finally be addressed. If it is, the project could dovetail with plans to make the Lincoln Avenue and Union Street area a commercial affiliate with Delaware’s Main Street program.

Both are part of the 10-year West Side Revitalization Plan. Woodlawn Trustees have already come before the plan’s steering committee to discuss the Flats, said Christian Willauer, a neighborhood planner with Cornerstone West.

"It was met with a lot of enthusiasm as a potentially transformative project for the west side," she said.

Mayor Dennis P. Williams declined to discuss the Flats last week, said spokeswoman Alexandra Coppadge. Williams

released a statement calling the project "a keystone to the area."

City Council President Theo Gregory said it's the largest redevelopment beyond the Riverfront district, and one that could boost west side businesses and instill confidence in other developers.

"I'm hopeful that it'll give people hope and give people a sense that it can be done, and we'll move to more aggressive revitalization in other parts of the city that we need," Gregory said.

Woodlawn Trustees also will create a central "spine" for the Flats along Sixth Street, with an arch similar to the Little Italy gateway, and include a mix of residential and commercial properties at the Union Street intersection.

Harold Gray, Wilmington's economic development director, said he sees the Woodlawn Trustees' plan as a model developers could replicate in other neighborhoods.

"Often times, investment carries with it a herd mentality," Gray said. "So if it's good for Woodlawn, then others will take notice."

Affordable housing

Named the Flats after the European term for apartments, the neighborhood sits just northeast of Union Park Gardens, originally built for shipbuilders in the first World War.

The Flats also had humble beginnings.

Born in 1835, Bancroft worked in his father's cotton mills and became a partner by the time he turned 30. He formed the Woodlawn Co., which later became the Woodlawn Trustees, in 1901, and spent the next decade developing housing for nearly 400 families, according to the Woodlawn Trustees' website.

The intent, Woodlawn Trustees Chief Operating Officer Vernon Green said, was to give the average retail, mill or city worker a decent place to live. In rebuilding the neighborhood, Woodlawn Trustees want to preserve the "same feel and flavor of the community," said Rodney Lambert, the group's president and CEO.

"We feel that this new project will continue to fulfill the mission," Lambert said. "And we would like to do this for another 100 years."

For all the transformation, the nonprofit has kept a focus on keeping some aspects of life in the Flats the same, including keeping rent under control despite massive development.

Monthly rent in the Flats ranges from $595 for a one-bedroom unit to $950 for three bedrooms, Green said. Most units have two bedrooms, which can run between $640 to $835 a month, he said.

The new, larger units will be "very comparable to our current rate structure," Green said, noting energy-efficient units might reduce utility bills enough to produce a net savings in living costs.

Delaware already has a need for affordable housing, while Wilmington has its own problems of poverty concentration, said Ken Smith, director of the Delaware Housing Coalition.

To afford a fair-market, two-bedroom rental in New Castle County, residents must make more than $21 an hour, almost equivalent to three minimum-wage jobs, Smith said. There are only 40 units available statewide for every 100 extremely low-income renters, he said.

The Flats marks a significant number of affordable units, and its presence in the city is vital as the federal government reduces housing aid.

Price pays $565 a month for rent and keeps utilities under $150 a month. He's informed Woodlawn Trustees about his retirement from St. Francis Hospital after working more than 40 years. He wants to stay and hopes his landlords will work with him on costs.

Like other residents, he says the rent cost will be key.
"I don't know what the future's going to bring," Price said, "but I'd like to stay with Woodlawn for as long as I can."

A rebirth slated

Barbara Yeatman grew up at 609 Springer St., living there for nearly 30 years before moving just outside the city. The neighborhood used to be known as "Incubator's Row" because of the many children who lived in the area, she said.

With the project slated to eliminate the two-block street she once called home, the 64-year-old Yeatman attended Thursday's preservation commission meeting to lament the demolition that would proceed the rebuilding. She called it a sad chapter for the Flats, but one that she understood.

Yeatman wrote a eulogy for the home she once shared with her parents and her many siblings. After her father died and her mother moved out of the home in 1977, Yeatman's sister, Lisa, moved in for 18 months.

The family held a party at the home before Yeatman's sister moved out.

"I do know one thing. As I left that night, I had the strangest feeling, it was a feeling of warmth," Yeatman wrote in the eulogy. "It was like the house was telling me, 'I'll be O.K., I'll have a resurrection.'"

Data analyst Patrick Sweet contributed to this report.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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