

Housing Authority rededicates renovated housing units; 'They are going to lift the whole South Side of Waukegan'

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Built nearly 60 years ago as a public-housing project on Waukegan's South Side, the newly gut renovated and rebuilt Barwell Manor Homes resemble little of what they once were — not even the name.

All that remains is the heavily remodeled area near the entrances surrounded by the newly built first and second floor of the one, two and three bedroom townhome-like units with an island in the kitchen along with a washer and dryer in each unit.

"I just about fainted," said Lake County Board Vice Chair Mary Ross Cunningham, who moved there in 1966 with three very young children as a young widow. "They are awesome. They have central air conditioning. They are going to lift the whole South Side of Waukegan."

Renamed the Bluffs at South Sheridan, the Waukegan Housing Authority rededicated the 44-unit Phase 1 of the 120-apartment rebuilding project Thursday on the city's South Side, and with it ushered in a new concept in affordable housing.

Charles J. Chambers Jr., the executive director and CEO of the housing authority, said the concept today under the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development has shifted from public housing to affordable housing, where people of varying incomes live side by side.

"We want to be able to provide housing that blends into the regular community," Chambers said. "You won't (necessarily) know who is living next to you. You won't be able to put a stigma on anyone because they'll be just like you. There are even some with views of Lake Michigan."



Eleanor Murkey, the former dean of the College of Lake County's Lakeshore Campus in downtown Waukegan and the WHA board chair, said the concept helps create a sense of community among neighbors.

"To me this affordable housing community is like any other development," Murkey said. "You find lower-income people and those with more income together. It's a whole new look for people who have been in our old development."

Chambers said rent is made affordable through HUD's Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) grants. The tenant pays rent in the amount of 30% of their income. The rest comes from the project's four private-sector partners who recoup their investment through tax credits.

With nearly 60-year-old buildings with a 40-year life expectancy built for a much warmer climate, Chambers said the WHA was able to get additional help to rebuild most of the project rather than renovate. It brought a new look, reinvigorating the neighborhood.

The four private-sector partners all have a vested interest in the project. Chambers said they are Bear Development, the developer; Clesia Ventures, a consultant; HDJ, the architects, and Construction Management Associates, the builder.

Waukegan Mayor Ann Taylor, who participated in the rededication ceremony, said the project is the beginning of more to come on Waukegan's South Side. It takes a spark to begin economic new growth, and she believes this is it.





"This is just the start," Taylor said. "You're going to see new growth. This area has been a food desert, and now it could get a grocery store. Something like this changes everything. The three-bedroom unit has a master bath."

For Cunningham, seeing the newly redone units gave her confidence the neighborhood is going to see economic growth. It was not that way when she arrived in 1966, three years after the project was built.

When Cunningham arrived, she said she began organizing her neighbors so they could have some say about who lived among them and to assure police patrols walking the area with tenant leaders. She became president of the tenant's organization.

"I talked to the chief of police then, and he sent officers on the second and third shift to walk the property with us," she said. "Now this area is really going to turn around."

Cunningham remained a resident until 1992 when her son, former Mayor Sam Cunningham, graduated from college and was able to buy her a house. All three of her children grew up in Barwell Manor and all three earned college degrees.

Murkey said the developers made an effort to hire young men and women from Waukegan to work on the projects. There were 15 young people with union jobs learning trades. In the past, builders brought crews from other communities.

"Before people in the community just stood around and looked at what was happening," Murkey said. "There are now 15 young people with unions becoming apprentices."

Sam Cunningham said he sees projects like the Bluffs at South Sheridan as a place where people can get a start. Like his mother, it is hard for him to recognize the place now.

"For a kid who grew up here this is great to see," Sam Cunningham said. "We all grew up to have very successful lives. From here, people can transition to buying their own home. It is a hand up."

Chambers said the Bluffs at South Sheridan are the start of redoing the WHA's portfolio of 448 units in different parts of Waukegan. Phase two, which has 20 units, should be done in June, and the other 56 townhomes by the end of next year. It is a six- to eight-year effort for all the homes.