

Real Estate A Special Report

Housing Hope in D.C.

Anacostia's new Henson Ridge development offers more than bricks and mortar.

BY JOHN D. HAGNER

At the celebration of its 50th anniversary in September, the Federal City Council, a nonprofit group that promotes improvements in the District of Columbia, reviewed some of the major projects in which it had played a pivotal role.

They included the Metro system; the saving and renovation of Union Station; and the creation of the Washington Convention Center, the MCI Center, and the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. Then there was the development of Henson Ridge, a 600-unit housing project in the Anacostia/Congress Heights section of Southeast Washington.

Excuse me: Henson Ridge? Why would the city's most powerful group of private citizens list an unknown housing development alongside its other instantly recognizable projects?

To understand why the council is so proud of Henson Ridge, it helps to look more closely at the project. Henson Ridge is located in the Congress Heights neighborhood in the heart of Anacostia, just off of Suitland Parkway. This previously was one of the most blighted communities in Southeast Washington, one that long typified the social and physical distress often associated with public housing.

Keep in mind, also, that while the District has experienced an economic boom in the last six years, with a real estate economy among the strongest in the nation, most working-class citizens have not fully shared in this boom. Henson Ridge is an effort to permit people of limited means to enjoy the benefits of the District's success.

Researchers believe that a large portion of the 57-acre site was once owned by a former slave, Tobias Henson. Beginning in 1813, Henson purchased the freedom of his wife, two daughters, and five grandchildren. When his payments were finished in 1826, he turned the site into a farm and renamed it "Henson Ridge."

MILITARY HOUSING

Ultimately, though, the area grew into a community of shacks. In the 1930s, the Alley Dwelling Authority, a federal public housing agency created to develop low-rent housing in D.C., bought the land. Next, temporary military housing was built during World War II on 30 acres of the site. The military housing was later converted into the 302-unit Frederick Douglass public housing project. And in the mid-1950s, the 348-unit Stanton Dwellings public housing project was built on 27 acres.

But by the 1990s, both projects had fallen into decline. The average income per family was \$6,000 in Frederick Douglass and \$9,000 in Stanton Dwellings. Finally, between 1998 and 2001, both projects were demolished for health, crime, and safety reasons.

But change was in the offing. In June 1998, a joint venture of Mid-City Urban LLC, a Silver Spring, Md.-based development firm experienced in urban redevelopment, and the Integral Group LLC of Atlanta, one of the nation's most respected minority-owned development firms, submitted a funding application under the HOPE VI grant program to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) on behalf of the District of Columbia Housing Authority (DCHA) for both projects. Mid-City Urban, by the way, was represented by my firm, Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice.

HOPE VI is a HUD grant program that takes a holistic approach to the revitalization of public housing communities. The goal is to transform communities—and at the same time transform the lives of their residents. HOPE VI combines "bricks and mortar" with social services to improve living environments for public housing residents and increase employment opportunities through training and counseling.

The 1998 application, for example, proposed a comprehensive redevelopment of both projects through mixed-income rental housing and home ownership opportunities, as well as communi-



MR. HENSON'S NEIGHBORHOOD: Henson Ridge, a 600-unit housing development set in Anacostia, features townhouses, curving sidewalks, parks, and plenty of open space.

ty facilities and a privately managed self-sufficiency program that teaches job skills and seeks work for the unemployed. In addition, the application featured a financing plan that leveraged federal, city, and private funds.

The Federal City Council worked with the DCHA to create a community development corporation to facilitate the application process. The nonprofit also provided early funding for community and support services for the current residents. HUD, however, turned down the application.

That was not the end of the story. A second round of intensive, community-based planning sessions followed and resulted in a revised redevelopment plan for a second application in 1999. With the support of the community, the city, the Federal City Council and others, HUD awarded the DCHA nearly \$30 million in HOPE VI funds to complete the project.

MORE THAN BUILDINGS

HOPE VI is about more than buildings. Henson Ridge has a strong focus on personal development. The Henson Ridge Community and Support Services Program (CSSP), funded with more than \$4 million in HOPE VI funds, provides services to families relocated from the original public housing.

Returning residents are required to participate in the CSSP and will eventually be required to find jobs, unless the requirement is waived for age, health, or other reasons. The CSSP provides job readiness training, job placement, substance abuse counseling, home ownership training, and a host of other programs. These programs help relocated residents meet the strict criteria for re-entry to the project. As a result, the first phase of Henson Ridge boasts a 74 percent re-entry rate, five times the national average of 15 percent for HOPE VI redevelopments.

Community involvement in the planning of Henson Ridge reached unprecedented levels. From the beginning of the effort,

the DCHA recognized the need for an advisory committee to oversee redevelopment activities, make recommendations on programs, and conduct regular information-sharing meetings for the greater neighborhood. Current and former residents of Frederick Douglass and Stanton Dwellings have been involved in the project from the outset. The resident councils of the two projects formed a joint community development corporation to increase resident involvement in all aspects of the redevelopment. There have been literally hundreds of meetings with community participation to plan Henson Ridge.

One example of community involvement is the location of the rental units for senior citizens. All the residences for seniors are located near the center

of the community where they have the best access to the community amenities such as recreation areas, parks, and an elementary school where they might want to volunteer. Another example is the new street names, all of which were picked by community members.

By working with the CSSP and local contractors, Mid-City Urban and Integral have been able to provide employment and contracting opportunities at the project. More than 130 local persons have been employed by contractors working at Henson Ridge, mostly through placements by the CSSP. In addition, 76 percent of the dollars in construction-related contracts have gone to minority-owned firms.

Not all of these efforts have been completely successful. In lieu of knocking down the old buildings on the Stanton Dwellings site, a "deconstruction" program was put into place to salvage as much reusable building material as possible. While the program was good for the environment, employment training, and job creation, it was not economically viable on such a large scale because of the lack of demand for old construction materials.

NEW URBANISM

The new project does benefit from an innovative design. Internal streets were redesigned and moved to create the pattern of a historic Anacostia neighborhood. This means that Henson Ridge has functional pedestrian-oriented curved streets with sidewalks, a system of public alleys to remove some cars from the streets, short sections of town homes, and lots of open spaces and parks. All these changes follow the principle of "New Urbanism," an urban planning concept that tries to make neighborhoods more user-friendly and attractive to residents.

Henson Ridge is targeted for a mix of those with mostly lower incomes. The public housing units are targeted at annual family incomes under \$30,000. The moderate-income units are

targeted at annual family incomes between \$27,000 and \$65,000, depending on family size. The market-rate units for sale are targeted at annual family incomes above \$40,000.

The town homes—available to people at all income levels—all have street-facing front doors and front and back yards. Fourteen distinct façade types create a highly varied street front. Many town homes will have front porches and other individualized elements. Every town home will be constructed to the same high-quality standards, whether rental or home ownership, public housing or market rate income. Home owners will be able to purchase additions and detached garages, but from the street, the home ownership and rental town homes are indistinguishable.

Mid-City Urban worked with Beazer Homes, the eighth-largest home builder in the nation, on the design and construction of the first phase of the town homes. This was the first time a major home builder has undertaken a large residential project in the District. The design of the town homes was taken from different “starter” town home designs. Then, extra amenities were added. Each town home has a porch or patio, central air conditioning, mini-blinds, walk-in closets, a frost-free refrigerator, a self-cleaning oven, a dishwasher, a disposal, and a washer and dryer.

The 320 town homes sold to individual buyers are being offered to low-income families with at least one wage earner at minimum wage, moderate-income families at or below 80 percent of area median income, and families who have no income limitations. Low-income home-buyers receive assistance through the DCHA’s Housing Choice Voucher Program launched in 2003. The 280 rental units are being offered to low-income public housing families and moderate-income families.

Approximately 260 units will be targeted to low-income families, including many former residents of the previous public housing projects. These will be mixed in with the 340 moderate and higher-income units. This means that 390 public housing units in the old Frederick Douglass and Stanton Dwellings pro-

ject were not replaced. In order to replace public housing units on a one-for-one basis, more than two Henson Ridge communities would have to be built. The inability to address the needs of all the public housing residents is, of course, a major drawback in the HOPE VI program.

On the other hand, these three-level town homes are truly affordable. The two-bedroom town homes are 1,632 square feet and are currently priced at \$176,900. The larger town homes are 2,040 square feet and are priced at \$197,900 for a three-bedroom, \$206,900 for a four-bedroom, and \$209,900 for a five-bedroom. There is no difference between the town home that a public housing family rents and the town home that a moderate-income family rents. In fact, due to a creative mix of financing, the low and moderate income rental units are interchangeable. They might be low-income public housing one year and moderate income tax-credit housing the next year.

Henson Ridge was made possible by the almost \$30 million HOPE VI grant from HUD to the DCHA. But HUD isn’t the only party that contributed. The District is contributing more than \$10 million in direct grants through the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development and the Capital Improvement Program, with an additional \$2 million coming from the DCHA. The D.C. Housing Finance Agency is providing tax-exempt bonds to finance the rental units. Private money is also going into the project. SunTrust Bank provided the construction financing for the town homes that will be sold and Related Capital Company in New York City is providing the equity investment for the tax-credit rental units. When added up, the total cost will be approximately \$120 million, including the cost of the CSSP programs.

While it might not be as visible as the Washington Convention Center or the MCI Center, Henson Ridge is a great success story in affordable housing.

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