

Homes, hopes rise at Mattapan site

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Hospital grounds reborn as housing

By John R. Ellement, Globe Staff | May 7, 2008

Jim Clark has been connected to the former Boston State Hospital grounds in Mattapan since 1969, and was often questioned when he talked about turning the weed-choked grounds into an oasis.

But yesterday Clark was wearing a smile as he talked about the site of what was once a state institution for the mentally ill.

"The dream has become a reality," said the 65-year-old head of the Boston State Hospital Community Advisory Council. "And it really means a lot."

Clark was talking about Olmsted Green, the development of town houses, apartments, senior housing, and a skilled nursing facility that is steadily rising from the eyesore that the hospital grounds had become since its closure in 1979.

The project has drawn state and private investment and is being overseen by Lena Park Community Development Corporation, whose leader was in a buoyant mood as she surveyed the red, green, and yellow buildings under construction.

"We are not building another neighborhood" in a city known for its insularity among residents, said E. Lorraine Baugh, whose career as a nurse started on the hospital grounds 40 years ago. "We feel that by building a new community in the heart of the city of Boston, people will see that it is possible to do something different."

Olmsted Green is being built on both sides of Morton Street near its intersection with Harvard Street and is seen by some longtime Mattapan residents as a victory because residents have fought off a variety of unpopular ideas, including an industrial park plan in 1981.

"It's a very exciting, uplifting day for us," said Mary Burks, who has lived nearby for 30 years and has been on the community advisory council for the past five years. "It will do so much to grow and develop this area, and we are so pleased. I love it."

Burks, Clark, and Baugh joined with developers Kirk Sykes and Jerome Rappaport Jr. and Governor Deval Patrick to celebrate a construction milestone and to prepare for welcoming renters and homeowners in the coming weeks.

"Houses for everybody," Sykes said of the philosophy that has guided the development. "Houses you can own. Houses you can rent. A place for everybody is what we are celebrating today."

Olmsted Green is on a 42-acre parcel of the former hospital grounds, and the \$180 million project is expected to generate 153 affordable-housing rental properties, 287 town houses and condos, 83 units of senior housing targeted at homeless elders, and a 123-bed skilled nursing and mental health facility.

Developers have also emphasized hiring from the neighborhood and say that 50 percent of the workforce are minority workers and that they have steered 30 percent of subcontracts to minority-owned companies, officials said.

Olmsted Green joins the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Nature Center, which opened in 2002, and a second housing development, called Harvard Commons, which is also under construction on other parcels of the hospital land.

Patrick, a Milton resident, toured a nearly completed apartment and said he has been driving past the area for years.

He said Olmsted Green could become the model of how to wisely recycle other vacant hospital grounds and unused properties around the state.

"The families who will live in these homes . . . will have a sense of hope, and possibility, and opportunity," he said.

Patrick recalled how, as a youth, he lived in a Chicago neighborhood where every child was watched over by adults,

who would not hesitate to discipline a child and then alert the parents.

"So you would get it two times," Patrick said to approving chuckles. "I want that neighborhood right here in Olmsted Green, and that's what you've been working for."

Clark said he first got involved with the hospital grounds through a community garden, which once had 500 families as members. He said the arrival of the development will not mean his departure.

"This is victory over struggle and setbacks," Clark said. "We intend to remain until the last brick is laid."

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