

Making Change: Front Door Open for Arbor Park

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A high point has been reached for a unique Cleveland housing project. The Arbor Park development is two-thirds complete and there are more applicants than units available in the low-income development. For this east-side complex, more than just the bottom line is at stake. As part of *Making Change: Reinventing our Economy*, ideastream's Shula Neuman reports.



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When you look out the living room window of one of the new apartments of Arbor Park, you'll see a picturesque view of a front lawn or a playground. You can see everyone who parks in front of your unit and then greet them as they walk up the path directly to your front door. While none of that may sound terribly impressive, it's a big change from the apartment you would have seen just four years ago on the very same tract of land when it was known as Longwood. Christina Alletto is president of the Finch Group, the company that developed and manages Arbor Park. She says having a front door that opens onto the street is more than a convenience.

Christina Alletto: And the idea was to create space that was nice, that people could take ownership of because it's by definition that this is my door and my space.

Along the same lines, each block of the townhouse-style apartments surround a courtyard that is accessible only by the people who live in the units. Alletto says many of the complex's special features were the result of multiple focus groups that the Finch Group organized with both residents and non-residents of Longwood.

Christina Alletto: And the one thing we said to residents was, "Imagine, if you will, that you can take a clean sheet of paper - there's no restrictions - what's important to you, what would you want to see?" and started to condense it and we came back with, OK, security's very important. Being able to wash your clothes is very important in your own home.

Other must haves include storage space, garbage disposals, large refrigerators and high quality plumbing and electrical fixtures. The residents pretty much got what they asked for, Alletto says. Cleveland City Council President Frank Jackson also got what he wanted: federal funding for the new, low-income housing in his ward to replace the dilapidated Longwood.

Frank Jackson: Now, there were a lot of knuckleheads that got evicted because they needed to be. Good people who were there were not displaced and as they do the phases of long, they move people around so that everyone who was a good tenant in good standing will eventually be in one of the new units.

In working out the \$111 million deal to construct Arbor Park, Jackson requires any contractors involved in building it to employ people who lived in Longwood, or at least in the Central Neighborhood, or at least in the city.

Frank Jackson: I don't begrudge anyone making money as long as it's legal. And so if in fact people want to come to Central and make money then I believe that they have an obligation to leave some of it there - that obligation is in terms of contracts and who they hire.

Marous Brothers Construction hired John Torres to oversee that the company fulfill that obligation. As general contractor for Arbor Park, Marous Brothers has 11% of its workforce from the city Torres says, which beats the 10% goal. He says even though most local hires lacked a construction background, the experience has been worthwhile and he's pretty sure Marous Brothers will continue hiring local and minority workers on future projects.

John Torres: When you offer residents to rebuild their own life, so to speak, whether it's the fact that they have employment and-or they're doing work right where they live, or at least close by. And I'm sure a lot of them drive by and say, "This is what I built." So there's ownership that comes along with that.

That sense of ownership - by both construction workers as well as residents - makes the development's managers hopeful that it won't disintegrate over time the way Longwood did. But according to St. Louis-based developer Richard Baron, Arbor Park will face an uphill battle in maintaining its quality simply because it is exclusively low-income housing.

Richard Baron: Segregating people by income is a bad idea.

Baron says mixed-income housing tends to be much more successful and have more staying power. He's observed this from his work in Atlanta, St. Louis and Cleveland's Hough neighborhood.

Richard Baron: The kind of social structure that you find in an area, in a neighborhood that has a variety of a different types of individuals and families living there, and the kind of support, for example, that those families will give to a local school. All of the things that one hopes will happen in any neighborhood tend to be less likely to happen in a low income neighborhood.

Wesley Finch, chairman of Finch Group, which manages Arbor Park, says his company has taken precautions to minimize the risk and maintain the complex's stability. He says residents' apartments are routinely monitored for cleanliness and for any signs that a house is being illegally shared. What's more Finch Group has agreed to a 15 year management commitment to maintain Arbor Park exactly as it is today. Finch says what really helps is that people are clamoring to live there.

Wesley Finch: As opposed to people who have to live there, that is the best way to maintain the property. It will allow both the landlord as well as their neighbors to keep a lot of pressure on residents who do not maintain the property.

For now, Arbor Park is still new and unmarred by trouble. And there are signs that other entities have faith in the development's potential, starting with the Dave's supermarket is to open in a nearby shopping plaza. In Cleveland, Shula Neuman, 90.3.