

FACE PAIN?



End is near for Clifton eyesores

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The dilapidated former American Legion hall on Lake Avenue, above, will be razed and replaced by low and moderate-income housing. An artist's rendering of the new housing slated for Lake Avenue is pictured at right.

CLIFTON – Two vacant City-owned properties in Botany Village that have been demolished or left in disrepair for years awaiting redevelopment were recently purchased by nonprofits with a track record for transforming eyesores into affordable housing.

For residents whose homes neighbor the City-owned properties, the emergence of the developers serves as a light at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

The two tax-exempt properties were previously linked with redevelopment partners nearly three years ago in the spring of 2012, only to see delays and other issues sidetrack the projects.

On Tuesday, by a 5-0 vote, Clifton City Council members approved Community Options Inc. and Start Easy Eagle Development (SEED) Corp. as redevelopers of two vacant sites on Arthur Street and Lake Avenue.

According to officials, the developers are building low and moderate-income housing so Clifton can meet its Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) obligations.

"Hopefully, [these projects] will get done soon," said Councilman Steve Hatala.

Mayor James Anzaldi echoed his colleague's sentiments, voicing his hope that one or both projects are completed before 2016.

On Arthur Street, a small empty lot currently sits where a dilapidated home previously served as a bastion for rodents and mischievous youths. Demolished nearly three years ago, neighbors had often reported homeless individuals entering the residence which measured 25 feet by 87 feet. The structure had been in "poor shape" for more than 20 years.

Frederick Brown, who lived next door to the neglected home for four years before it was knocked down, said he resorted to utilizing a pellet gun to keep skunks, raccoons and stray cats from entering his property.

Robert Stack, president of Community Options, said the two-story, four-bedroom home planned for 12 Arthur St. will provide low-income housing for four individuals with developmental disabilities such as autism and cerebral palsy. He said the home will include 24-hour supervision.

Svetlana Repic-Qira, the organization's vice president, said the nonprofit does not expect to break ground for "at least" another six months



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and anticipates opening the 1,574-square-foot home in the spring of 2016.

Because those with severe disabilities require an environment and support staff tailored to their specific needs, Stack said the organization provides small, closely supervised facilities.

"We enjoy a sterling reputation in the community," he said. "We are great neighbors and always make sure our homes are well maintained and blend into the community."

A national agency, Community Options has placed thousands of individuals throughout several states like Arizona, Texas and New York. Stack said the nonprofit corporation, which was founded in New Jersey 26 years ago, boasts 104 homes throughout the state.

The Bergen County branch of the United Way charitable organization were slated to redevelop the Arthur Street property into a two-story, four-bedroom home for adults with special needs. United Way's developer, BCUW/Madeline Housing Partners, planned to match \$160,000 which Clifton had allocated from its housing trust and partnered with Community Options as a service provider.

"[We're] excited about another opportunity to develop housing in the community for people with disabilities," Repic-Qira said. "As the need for appropriate housing increases for citizens with disabilities with the closings of state developmental centers, we welcome the opportunity to partner with municipalities and other developers to develop affordable housing."

As for the Lake Avenue property, which formerly housed the Clifton Memorial Post 347 American Legion, change finally appears to be on the horizon.

The building, which has been abandoned since 2007 and remains a long-standing quality of life issue for residents who live in the neighborhood, will be razed this spring.

NewBridge, a community organization founded in 1963 and licensed by the New Jersey Division of Mental Health Services, plans to break ground on a three-story, six-unit building before the summer and have families moved in before the beginning of 2016.

SEED, a subsidiary of NewBridge, has developed affordable housing to families in Bergen, Essex, Hudson and Essex counties. NewBridge operates a two-unit building in Athenia which has accommodated two families with special needs since 2012.

Robert Parker, NewBridge's chief executive officer, said the funding is "all lined up" and zoning work has been completed. He said NewBridge plans to close on the property within the next 30 days.

"We're almost all set to rock and roll," said Parker, adding that the affordable housing facility will include three three-bedroom apartments and three two-bedroom residences. "We believe it will fit into the neighborhood and the community beautifully."

Considered an "eyesore" by neighbors, including Linette Fernandez, who moved in next door more than five years ago, the vacant building became a place for destitute or homeless individuals to take shelter, hang out or abuse drugs.

In addition to empty liquor bottles and broken glass frequently adorning the property, the former legion hall became a haven for pests and rodents such as opossums.

Neighbors said every few months Clifton police officers are dispatched to the Lake Avenue site to clear people out and off of the vacant building's grounds. But, weeks later, new faces show up.

On one occasion Clifton Journal visited the site as police responded to complaints from residents. Police cleared out the individuals found loitering a few steps behind the "no trespassing" sign posted on the property.

A third Clifton property located at 988-1010 Main Ave. is also slated for redevelopment, said City Manager Dominick Villano. The site sits on about an acre of land and is located in a manufacturing area near Passaic's border.

However, officials say their hands have been tied for some time due to delays in COAH monies and regulation changes.

Villano said the municipality implemented a plan for the three properties and submitted it for state approval but continue to wait on funding.

"We did everything we could on our end and now it's up to the state," Villano said. "We already went for City planning and zoning approval. So, once we receive word that we can proceed we can move ahead with construction. We're anxious to get them moving along."

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