

Smart Growth Meets Affordable Housing The Story of Claymont Renaissance in New Castle County, Delaware

By Marguerite Ashley and Bob Weiner

“They laughed when I sat down to play,” read piano lesson advertisements of the mid-twentieth century. When the gritty blue-collar community of Claymont started planning for its future and calling it Claymont Renaissance, Delaware’s development wise heads definitely smiled. Six years later, a consensus-driven, neo-traditional redevelopment plan is ensconced in New Castle County zoning law, and industrial Claymont is the cutting edge of smart growth in Delaware.

The civic partnership called Claymont Renaissance has assembled strong financial, regulatory, and political commitments from state, county, and private interests. In addition to a County commitment to modernizing an aging sewer system and a State commitment to multi-modal streetscape improvements, more than \$130 million of new private investment capital is underway or planned for housing, offices, retail and parks. All of the new construction will occur within a design ethic that respects the development pattern of a place that was old when the twentieth century was new. Harvest-time has arrived for the time-consuming and sometimes arduous growth process called public visioning.

Smart growth and affordable housing are not mutually exclusive. We have long predicted that housing affordability would follow when land-use regulations allowed for compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly redevelopment close to transportation, jobs, and amenities. And Claymont Renaissance is proving the point.

Elsewhere in New Castle County, the real estate market and land-use regulations have inhibited production of housing affordable to households earning below the county’s median income of \$74,000. Now in Claymont, a carrot and stick model for affordable housing development has emerged. Its centerpiece is a regulatory tool called the Hometown Overlay, a zoning codification of Claymont’s historic development patterns, as well as a package of powerful economic incentives for developers. The incentives include certainty in development approvals, streamlined permitting, and housing densities nearly double those allowed in the County’s Unified Development Zoning Code.

The impact of the incentives can be seen in the latest and highest profile development project for Claymont Renaissance, the intensely negotiated redevelopment of the 66-acre aging and largely dilapidated rental community of Brookview. The developer, attracted by Hometown Overlay incentives, has agreed to produce 240 units of affordable housing, or 20% of the total 1,200 units planned. Most of the new housing will be homeowner units, rather than rental properties. That will benefit a community with a homeownership rate of just 52%, which is well below the county’s average homeownership rate of 74%. The affordable homes will sell for approximately \$165,000. Of approximately 350 residents in the original rental community, 200 households have found other affordable rental housing, with about half of them still living in the Claymont area. Several original

residents have bought their first homes. The county is offering home ownership counseling to the original Brookview residents, about 50 to 100 of whom are expected to qualify to buy one of the new affordable homes.

The Brookview redevelopment project is the first use of inclusionary zoning in Delaware. It is ideally located in a village-like setting of mixed land uses and incomes, and is served by an excellent public transportation system that includes commuter rail. The new traditional neighborhood community was designed by industry leaders the Torti-Gallas group, in conjunction with public input from a week of intensive design charrettes. The concept plan includes narrow streets, alleys and garages behind buildings, public green spaces, and community meeting facilities grouped around two broad, well-landscaped avenues, in conjunction with an adjacent six-acre commercial redevelopment project.

Affordable housing is a hot topic today in New Castle County. Home prices have jumped 20% since 2004, and new County Executive Christopher Coons has made affordable housing a priority for his administration. In fall 2004, the County convened a large-scale citizen participation process as part of the revision of its Comprehensive Plan, and the County Council has convened an ad hoc affordable housing committee. The ideas on the drawing board include accessory dwelling units (granny suites), which are slated for county council consideration in the fall, and county-wide inclusionary zoning. An inclusionary zoning ordinance is expected to be considered by the end of 2006. The county also is working to create a housing trust fund to supplement federal housing funds, and “homeownership zones” with enhanced homebuyer incentives. The incentives that are being considered for developers include increased density allowances and expedited development approvals.

The background for these discussions is the zoning flexibility and maturing smart growth principles which the Claymont Renaissance effort has brought into the public consciousness. Claymont will likely be the incubator for new affordability strategies in New Castle County, just as it has been for inclusionary zoning.

For more information, go to: <http://www.claymontrenaissance.org/>

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