

HUD secretary visits Stamford, tours housing authority development

Elizabeth Kim, Staff Writer

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STAMFORD -- Shaun Donovan, secretary of the federal Department of Housing and Development, stopped in Stamford briefly on Friday to tour one of the housing authority's developments and meet with a group of private and nonprofit developers, housing officials and Fairfield County mayors.

"Housing isn't just about bricks and mortar," he said. **"Housing connects to so many issues.**

"A region can't be economically competitive if you don't have reasonably priced houses close to where the jobs are," he said.

Donovan spoke to an audience of about 30 people who convened at Fairgate, a roughly \$41 million West Side mixed-income housing authority development completed last fall as part of a federal program known as Hope VI.

In addition to Mayor Michael Pavia, the event was attended by area chief elected officials, including Bill Finch, the mayor of Bridgeport, and Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia.

The visit was arranged by U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, D-Greenwich, who said he Conn., to create a dialogue between local and federal officials on the significance of affordable housing in the region.

Himes, who previously worked for a nonprofit developer, has portrayed affordable housing as a crucial economic issue for the region.

"The housing shortage that this community faces is always number one or number two ... as reasons why people don't want to move into the area," Himes said

Prior to the meeting, Donovan was taken on a brief tour by Vin Tufo, executive director of the city's housing authority, also known as Charter Oak Communities.

Donovan, Himes, and several others were taken to the construction site of one of the housing authority's upcoming mixed-income projects at 58 Progress Drive.

Come next summer, the development will be known as Westwood, a community of townhouses that will have 95 rental units, of which 60 percent will be affordable and the remaining will be sold at market rate.

The project is part of a broader initiative to replace Vidal Court, an older public housing complex on Merrell Avenue, with mixed-income communities spread across the West Side. Part of the land was obtained through a swap with Stamford Hospital.

Donovan later praised the project, adding he was impressed by the collaboration.

This was the first on-site visit by Donovan at the city's housing authority, which has in the past hosted several HUD secretaries, Tufo said.

During his talk, Donovan stressed that HUD had come a long way since it was established in the 1960s. Today, he said, HUD officials work with other federal agencies such as the Department of Transportation and Environmental Protection Agency to distribute planning grants.

Donovan cited strong commitment by the Obama administration to the issue of affordable housing, saying that communities have an opportunity to seek federal support for their projects.

"There will never be a better friend to public housing than this administration," he said.

Staff Writer Elizabeth Kim can be reached at elizabeth.kim@scni.com or 203-964-2265.