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West Side revitalization project signals new beginning

By Magdalene Perez
Staff Writer

STAMFORD — The sound of buzz saws cuts through the air at the corner of Fairfield and Stillwater avenues.

There, the \$89 million project to replace 1930s-era low-income housing at Fairfield Court with new, less densely populated, mixed-income apartments is rapidly taking shape.

New building frames are standing, and construction workers are busily laying cables, building roofs and putting foundations into place.

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whether they will move back. Others are content with their existing accommodations.

"A few of the people said they're satisfied with where they are," said Barkley, who lives in one of the new buildings on Clinton Avenue. "They don't really want to go through that transition again."

The new Fairfield Court is partially an attempt to change the character of the West Side, which has struggled with crime and drug-related violence. It follows a formula for revitalization set by the transformation of Waterside's blighted Southfield Village into the mixed-income community now known as Southwood Square.

Both projects used funds from federal HOPE VI grants, which are aimed at revitaliz-

If the pace continues, the first new apartments should be ready for occupancy by this summer, with the entire project completed by early 2010.

Public officials have hailed the project as a new beginning for the West Side. It is the first of two major neighborhood revitalization projects to replace aging public housing with mixed-income developments.

Replacing publicly subsidized high-rise housing with "integrated" communities has gained support nationally through federal

ing public housing as mixed-income developments.

U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Bridgeport, who helped secure \$19.6 million in federal HOPE VI funding for Fairfield Court and toured the project last month while campaigning for re-election, said he believes the Stamford housing authority is leading the nation in transforming public housing from monolithic communities, where poverty was the norm, to ones that are economically integrated.

"The beauty of the HOPE VI grants is it eliminates the warehousing of the poor," Shays said. "You could have someone that is low income next to someone who is working at UBS."

Nationally, some have criticized the HOPE VI program for displacing residents and, in some cases, not providing

one-for-one replacement of low-income housing. Others have criticized it for bringing developments under private management using public funding.

Longtime residents of Southwood Square have seen the housing authority's new policies and drawn their own conclusions.

Hector Lopez, 32, was raised in Southfield Village and experienced its transformation to Southwood Square. He said the change in living conditions there is dramatic. Residents now have amenities such as central air conditioning, washers and dryers and wall-to-wall carpeting, Lopez said.

Lopez, who recently moved back to the neighborhood with his 2-year-old son, said the area now has less crime.

"Back in the day, kids

really help the revitalization of this neighborhood." The project has dispersed many former Fairfield Court residents, and it is not yet clear how many will return. The housing authority moved 76 of the 139 occupied households to two new buildings on Taylor Street and Clinton Avenue, according to Vincent Tufo, the authority's development director. About 15 or 20 residents took federal Section 8 subsidies and moved elsewhere in the city or out of state, he said.

About 40 remaining residents

wouldn't even be able to ride their bike," Lopez said, standing on a corner in the neighborhood and pointing to a boy who was enjoying an afternoon ride. "It's safer now than it was back then. The living is way better because we don't live locked in."

A similar aesthetic is planned for the new Fairfield Court, which will consist of 15 Georgian-style buildings with one, two and three bedroom units. It will be a departure from the old two- and three-story buildings, which the housing authority described in a recent report on the revitalization plan as being in "poor physical condition" with "deteriorating" utilities.

The old apartments inadvertently had become housing for many people with disabilities, without services to support them, because 62

percent were one-bedroom units, Tufo said. Many of the disabled residents now live in the authority's Post House on Clinton Avenue, where support services are provided, he said.

The project is funded by public and private sources, with \$7.5 million in state bonds, \$3.5 million from the city, \$36 million in state tax credit equity, \$10 million from mortgage financing and \$12.4 expected from the sale of homeownership units, in addition to the \$19.6 million federal grant, Tufo said.

And the authority soon will turn to a larger West Side project. By 2013, housing officials plan to have razed and rebuilt nearby Vidal Court, another decades-old housing complex, for \$136 million. The new mixed-income development will replace 216 low-

income apartments, with an addition of 134 market-rate units, for a total of 350, according to a summary of the project. Today, the five-story buildings are outfitted with rusted stairwells and balconies, and barbed wire around the mailboxes.

Nellie Hinton, a longtime West Side homeowner, said she believes the change will be good for the neighborhood. As someone who lived near Fairfield Court since 1978, she saw the Stillwater Avenue area become a place "heavy with drugs," she said.

"We need change over here," Hinton said. "We just needed a cleaner neighborhood. Hopefully, it will attract new people."

— Staff Writer Magdalene Perez can be reached at magdalene.perez@scni.com or at 964-2240.

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