

Creative Re-Use for Affordable Housing in Elkton

Elkton Senior complex highlights Community Development Week

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ELKTON — For Ed Sobocinski, the North Street Senior Residences could be summed up in one word: Classy.

The retired Delaware lawyer moved to the Elkton apartment complex about 18 months ago after learning of the new community from a neighbor. He was living with his fiancée when she passed away in 2014, and her family wanted to sell the home. Needing to find a new place to live quickly and on a fixed income, the North Street Senior Residences, which opened at 218 North St. in January 2015, was a godsend to Sobocinski.

“The common areas were exceptional and I really liked the units,” he said Tuesday afternoon, noting the complex was close to his daughter who lives in Fair Hill and his sons who live nearby in Delaware. “I didn’t know much about Elkton when I moved here, but there are a lot of amenities nearby, including Union Hospital just a short walk away. The security is terrific and the Elkton Police Department is even across the street.

“My experience here has been exceptional and I feel I made a good choice coming here.”

For Frank Hodgetts and Pat Wagner, two of the chief architects of the project that turned the former Cecil County Jail into a 53-unit senior apartment complex, Sobocinski’s praise was worth all of the difficult work that went into it.

But on Tuesday, their project was highlighted by more than just one of its tenants, as it was showcased by the Community Development Network of Maryland (CDNM) during Maryland Community Development Week, held Oct. 17-26.

The North Street Senior Residences was helped immensely by Maryland Rental Housing Works program funds, and is one of 38 projects statewide to have been helped by the gap-financing fund run by the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development, said Odette Davis, executive director of the CDNM, a network of nonprofits, small developers and community-based organizations. To date, more than \$71 million has been allocated to help affordable housing projects worth more than \$700 million come to fruition. To date, the program has helped create nearly 4,700 affordable rental homes and approximately 6,350 jobs for Maryland residents.

Hodgetts, president of Home Partnership Inc., the nonprofit affordable housing agency for Cecil and Harford counties that coordinated the North Street project, said Maryland Rental Housing Works funding accounted for \$2.5 million of the estimated \$8 million Elkton project — the second largest total behind a private investor.

“We sold the vision and Rental Housing Works helped us achieve it,” he said.

Meanwhile, Wagner, developer with the project's central contractor The Community Builders Inc., said the finished product — which retained much of historic jail's architecture while renovating the structure for adaptive reuse — was something of which his company was immensely proud.

“It was an incredible investment … and it's probably one of my favorite projects of my career,” he said. “Funding was very difficult on this one. Throughout the process, it was a collaboration between all parties that got this project done. And we're pleased with the outcome.”

Brian O'Toole, DHCD deputy director, also heaped praise on the use of Rental Housing Works funds to accomplish the North Street project, which remains fully leased with little turnover since opening.

“We appreciate that the North Street Senior Residences has become a cornerstone of Elkton,” he said, noting it not only created housing but also jobs and local economic impact.

While Davis said that the CDNM's slate of events this week underscore the effectiveness of programs like the Rental Housing Works fund, it also aims to emphasize the need for continued funding to the governor's office and the General Assembly. Last year, the CDNM requested \$25 million in state funding but received only \$12.5 million after the state budget was finalized.

Currently, \$54 million in projects are in the pipeline awaiting gap financing statewide, leaving a shortfall of nearly \$41 million, Davis explained.

“I know the governor gets it, so we're just hoping the legislature does too,” she said, noting that Gov. Larry Hogan's administration has agreed to fund at least \$10 million each year through his term and the legislature has the ability to add to that total each year.

More of those state-assisted projects may be coming to Cecil County if Hodgetts can push forward with a project he's been eyeing in Cecilton. That plan, as presented in 2014, is to build a 44-unit senior apartment complex near the Dollar General off Route 213 on town-owned land.

Hodgetts said Tuesday that the project remains in the planning phase, but added that recent conversations with state housing officials were positive and that they see potential in the Route 213 corridor for growth.