

URBAN RETOOL

MONOLITHS FELL AND ATTRACTIVE HOMES HAVE RISEN AT THE FORMER JEFFRIES PROJECT SITE NEAR DOWNTOWN DETROIT

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When most of the Jeffries Homes towers were imploded in 2001, it was difficult to imagine that a vibrant, economically diverse community would replace that decaying public housing complex just north of downtown Detroit.

Today, it's called Woodbridge Estates and the 47-acre area is bustling with single-family homes and townhouses and duplex and triplex rental properties. The houses are a well-designed mix of new construction that has a historic architectural feel. There are fountains and play areas for children.

The Woodbridge concept is part of a federal program called HOPE VI. Created in 1993 during former President Bill Clinton's first term, the program is designed to demolish and rebuild some of the country's most-battered public housing complexes. The goal of HOPE VI is to break up the islands of poverty in big cities and create mixed-income communities in which all the families live in homes with yards, front porches and driveways.

Woodbridge developers embraced the Hope VI goal and designed the Jeffries makeover for a mixed-income community. To that end, 70% of the renters receive a credit and 30% of the units rent at the market rate. Potential first-time homebuyers who meet low-income standards can receive financial help with down payments.

The project, however, is not without controversy. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development threatened to revoke \$33 million in unspent federal money because of delays in converting the project.

But after some retooling and management changes by the Detroit Housing Commission, the panel that oversees Woodbridge, the project began to roll. The grand opening was earlier this month and potential residents are stopping by for information, brochures and applications in a steady stream. With little marketing or fanfare, Woodbridge Estates officials created excitement about the idea of living here.

Population boom

Today 118 duplex and triplex rental units are occupied, and an August groundbreaking for 163 more rental units is planned. A total of 101 houses were for sale - 47 single family and 54 townhouses - and some have sold already.

The single-family homes measure 1,774 square feet to 2,442 square feet and range from \$250,000 to \$330,000. The luxury townhouses measure from 1,782 square feet to 1,947 square feet and cost \$245,000 to \$265,000. The smaller townhouses measure from 1,232 square feet to 1,487 square feet and will start at \$180,000 and go to \$205,000.

All that remains of the 13 towers built in 1955 - then a total of 2,170 apartments - are three towers that were converted for senior citizen living. In a \$33-million makeover, the graffiti was removed, utilities were upgraded and new windows and appliances were installed.

"It's very exciting, though we've certainly had our share of challenges," said Eric Gold, vice president of the Slavik Company of Farmington Hills, one of the project's four major developers. The others were Strather & Associates and Premier Property Management of Detroit and New York-based Rosenberg Housing Group. Master developer Scripps Park Associates LLC supervised the work.

"We're excited about what we're doing here - revitalizing a neighborhood. We didn't want to build houses; we wanted to build a new community," Gold said.

An added bonus to attract buyers: Woodbridge Estates, just off the Lodge service drive and West Canfield, is in a Neighborhood Enterprise Zone, and homeowners will get a 12-year, 70% reduction in property taxes. Detroit's homestead taxes are nearly 65 mills, but with the enterprise zone designation, taxes are reduced to 20 mills. So a homebuyer who purchased a \$329,900 house in Woodbridge Estates, would pay \$2,756 in taxes annually for 12 years, compared to a \$10,651 tax bill outside the zone.

That tax break is appealing to Judy Hankins, a west side Detroiter who is in the market to buy. But she still believes the homes are overpriced for the area.

"I think \$180,000 being the lowest price cuts a lot of working-class city people out," said the 50-year-old performing arts studio owner. "It's grand to see the new development around the city, but if we can afford to stay here is another question."

Recently, Hankins spent a gloriously sunny weekday morning walking around Woodbridge Estates with her wheelchair-using friend who lives in one of the senior towers. Sakunah DeLaney, 60, has arthritis and has used a wheelchair for two years. She said she loves to see the new house construction, but has no desire to move from her "perfectly nice" apartment. Apartment rent is subsidized based on the tenant's income.

"They are nice looking houses and it makes you feel uplifted to go by here," DeLaney said. "Though our part back there is a little scruffy," she said pointing to her tower, "it's a lovely area to live in now."

Perks and help

Todd Craft, a Woodbridge spokesman, said one goal developers had was to get Jeffries renters to move back to the area, but it's been difficult to find many of them. Because of various local and federal subsidies, former residents could afford to move back.

There are financial breaks for potential homeowners, too. For instance, unlike many newly-constructed homes, the landscaping is included in the price of Woodbridge houses, as are all the kitchen appliances except the refrigerator. "We wanted to create a package that would take minimal money to move forward," Craft said.

The people who are buying the real estate in Woodbridge generally fit a certain profile: They live in the city and work in the city. Many are firefighters, police officers, teachers and city and county employees, Craft said.

"It's a great opportunity for someone who has lived in the city to have something new," he said. A family from Sterling Heights relocated to Woodbridge recently after the husband was transferred to General Motors Co. headquarters in downtown Detroit, Craft said.

Experienced guide

Much of what Woodbridge has become can be attributed to Julie Fielek, president of South Lyon's Fielek Builders. She was Woodbridge's construction manager. Accustomed to constructing high-end homes in Washtenaw, Livingston and Ingham counties, Fielek said it became evident early that the city had not dealt with new construction in a long time. She said she established key relationships with the building and inspection departments and found good cooperation.

At times Fielek struggled to conform to the mandatory minority contract guidelines. At least 50% of her employees had to be Detroit residents, 20% had to be minorities, and 5% had to be women. She was encouraged to employ former Jeffries residents, too.

"It's really been an exciting challenge," she said. "It was a different experience to work in the city as opposed to where we've worked in the past. We're excited to be here. Hopefully the city will encourage more projects like this and upgrade its systems to handle such new construction."

For more information about Woodbridge Estates, call 313-833-2100 or go to www.woodbridgeestates.com.

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