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District no longer a mystery; it's home

By Rick Yencer
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MUNCIE -- Rosie Russell fell in love with Howard Square once she saw the porch outside her roomy, secure apartment in downtown Muncie.

"I said, 'I have to have that house,'" said Russell, who had lived in a rundown house along Eighth Street.

A few years ago, the lot behind the Muncie YMCA was no more than an overgrown lot with a concrete wall and some dilapidated and burned-out buildings, according to Steve Tomboni, executive director of the downtown YMCA.

"It is a wonderful addition to the neighborhood," Tomboni said of the new affordable housing development for senior citizens. "It makes everybody want to pay more attention to their property, and we have been paying more attention to the back of our building."

More than 100 people took advantage of an open house Thursday at the \$3.6-million project -- undertaken by Flaherty & Collins Properties, developers and manager of the Millennium Place neighborhood. The 30-unit complex that is now open includes a new 24-apartment structure on Jefferson Street and renovation of two older walk-up apartment buildings on Elm Street.

Jerry Collins, who graduated from Burriss School, said developing affordable housing in his hometown was an easy sell. And it is a good example of new urbanism that architects and planners designed.

"We have not had any problem finding residents," Collins said.

Howard Square is expected to be fully occupied by the end of the month, according to resident manager Misty Mann.

Recent housing surveys indicate more than 1,700 seniors need affordable housing, according to Community Development's consolidated plan.

And those percentages are growing, according to Sue Peden, Community Development's deputy director.

"The Census projects by 2010 that 60 percent of the population in Delaware County will be elderly," she said.

Brian Lough, downtown development director, said market surveys also showed a growing number of people wanted to live downtown.

With a mix of federal housing funds, state tax credits and other private money, Howard Square and the renovation of the two older buildings became a reality.

"It was labeled the mystery district because we did not know what was going on there," Lough said.

By bringing more people downtown, Lough anticipated the development would help open the way for a grocery store and other retail shops to support the new Millennium neighborhood.

Lucille Darden, who recently moved into a new Millennium home, said she was thinking about moving to Howard Square.

"It is really nice and everything is here," said Darden. "And there is security."

The apartment building has security cameras, an intercom system and locked doors. Although the downtown railroad line is just blocks away, Darden said residents could barely hear the trains from inside the building.

Russell, a retired nurse, noted the new neighborhood also was close to the YMCA and YWCA, where she likes to walk and do aerobics.

"This is a wonderful neighborhood," she said.

Howard Square by the numbers:

- Thirty units of affordable housing for seniors in downtown Muncie.
- One newly constructed building that contains 15 one-bedroom and nine two-bedroom apartments.
- A renovated building that contains four two-bedroom units
- A second renovated building that contains two two-bedroom units
- Apartments range from 815 to 1,158-square feet with rent between \$219 and \$612 monthly.
- Main building includes a community room, computer center, individual porches, carpeting, central air, washer-dryer connections, ceiling fans and cable-ready connections.
- Cost of project: \$3.6 million

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