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New urbanism showcased in Millennium housing project

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MUNCIE -- Duane Miller had no problem finding residents or investors for the fast-growing Millennium neighborhood along South Madison Street.

"There's a specific niche for affordable housing," said Miller, vice president of Flaherty & Collins Properties, developer and manager of Millennium.

With a \$5.7-million mix of public and private funds, the latest phase of Millennium -- 55 apartments that have the features of Victorian-era homes -- is on schedule and ready to open by November. It replaced the 60-year-old concrete-block buildings of Munsyana Homes, a public housing complex long known for violence and drug-related crime.

Dave West, who once lived at Munsyana, said neighbors liked the look of the colorful apartments complete with porches, spacious living areas and upstairs bedrooms.

"It will bring more families back," said West, who also looked forward to new single-family homes being built in the nearby Industry neighborhood.

Millennium is one of the examples of new urbanism that Muncie officials will show off when they host the Regional Neighborhood Network Conference starting today at the Horizon Convention Center. More than 300 people from dozens of Midwest cities will talk about what works when it comes to rebuilding inner city neighborhoods.

Mayor Dan Canan will kick off the event, and recalls the days he ran a pharmacy near the former public housing complex.

"It was not uncommon for Munsyana to be a center for drug dealing and murder," said Canan. "We have changed all that, and it has a huge impact on the surrounding area."

Just between Millennium and downtown, Howard Square -- an apartment complex for senior citizens -- rose from a neighborhood of rundown and burned-out businesses and homes.

And downtown Muncie has also undergone change since 2000, when the city rebuilt Walnut Street, and later invested \$1.5 million into renovating downtown buildings, producing more than \$10 million in private investment with new businesses, housing and entertainment venues.

That redevelopment effort was recognized recently by the Indiana Historic Landmarks Foundation for extraordinary historic preservation efforts.

Bill Morgan, a local historic preservationist, said the restoration effort created "an incredible turnaround" for the downtown that was once viewed as dirty and unsafe.

"People were once afraid to go downtown," said Morgan, also a member of the Muncie Historic Preservation and Rehabilitation Commission. "People are everywhere now with lights, music and art."

During a planning meeting Thursday, developers, architects and local officials involved in the Millennium project reported much progress on the current project with two more phases to go.

The \$40-million-plus project should be completed in the next two years with more apartments and single-family homes.

Miller said more than 100 applications had been received for the 55 new apartments.

Architect Russell Lewis, who was part of the design team for Millennium homes and apartments, said the latest development drew on visual cues that people who easily recognize.

While the apartments are not true Victorian homes, features like turrets, porches and the building colors illustrate that look.

“It gives people a sense of pride and identity of where they live,” said Lewis. “And if there is a sense of ownership, a resident can take that personal responsibility beyond the front door.”

The Muncie Housing Authority is the public agency responsible for the Millennium neighborhood. In 2003, the MHA received a \$12.3-million federal HOPE VI grant to provide affordable housing and is the public money behind Millennium.

“Millennium is a great example of the HOPE VI that works,” said MHA Director Guillermo Rodriguez.

Many of the federally funded housing projects stalled nationwide because of lack of private investment or local officials failure to proceed, Rodriguez said.

The housing authority is working with former Munsyana residents, encouraging them to return to Millennium. Several, like Emma Price and Lucille Darden, moved into the first Millennium neighborhood on Monroe and Vine streets last year.

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