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'Better quality housing' *Housing Authority launches major project as leader shares ambitious vision*

By Jon Jimison Times Editor

Patches of autumn-tinged grass intermingle with dirt on a vacant lot on Starmount Circle. But not for long.

Wilson Housing Authority leaders envision a new, three-story building to fill a void they say persists in affordable senior housing. About 60 Wilson community leaders, WHA staff and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development officials took part in a ceremony Tuesday morning to mark the official launch of the Pinnacle Point project, the first new construction for the Wilson Housing Authority in more than three decades.

With a sign announcing the project standing to his side, an emboldened Wilson Housing Authority President and CEO Edward R. Jagnandan thanked his board, financiers and community leaders.

By the end of 2013 or early the following spring, this project, which is being paid for through a \$7.5 million bond program, is expected to be complete.

Construction could begin before Christmas, Jagnandan said.

"This is a great day in the neighborhood," proclaimed Thomas Eatmon, chairman of the Wilson Housing Authority Board.

Plans call for 38 energy-efficient apartment units. The one-bedroom units are projected to be just under 700 square feet and the development also features a large community room with a kitchen for events, a library, fitness and computer rooms and lounge areas for residents, according to the official plans.

"This is an exciting project that will bring some of our senior citizens into better quality housing," Jagnandan said. "Thanks to our bond funding, we can make this important and long-range investment in the city of Wilson in a project that will also mean jobs for local workers and a better quality of life for those residents who move into these units."

Mayor Bruce Rose said he was proud of the work from Jagnandan and the housing authority.

"In Wilson, we believe everyone should have a decent, affordable place to live," Rose said.

This project marks a major step in improving overall quality of life in this neighborhood, said Ken Jones, Wilson Chamber of Commerce board chairman.

"People made this happen. This didn't just happen by chance," Jones said. "A lot of work by a lot of people, including Mr. Jagnandan and his staff, the city staff, the county staff, many private enterprises as well supported this This is really important to our community. We want affordable housing. We want good, affordable housing."

Terry Johnson, vice president of BB&T, which is financing the project, said the bank is proud to be part of this endeavor.

"We are all blessed to be standing here," Johnson said. "We all share an obligation to give back to the



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communities we serve ... When you get the hands of progress involved in a project like this, things turn and wheels move.”

THE FUTURE

Jagnandan, who has headed up the Wilson Housing Authority for six years, has a vision that would lead to improved housing for thousands of low-income residents, he said.

The Wilson Housing Authority has more than 781 units of public housing in the city of Wilson and 637 Section 8 vouchers throughout all of Wilson County.

The units are located at E.B. Jordan Homes, El Ramey Circle, the Bruce Rose Plaza, Whitfield Homes and Forrest Road with almost 50 other properties, including houses and duplexes, scattered across Wilson.

He says he wants to improve the housing stock and previously sought to turn the Bruce Rose Plaza, a high-rise housing complex for the elderly, into an assisted living facility. That project didn't come to fruition.

However, he has plans for a “substantial rehabilitation” of both Bruce Rose Plaza and E.B. Jordan homes, Jagnandan said Tuesday.

Announcements could come early next year regarding both properties, he said.

E.B. Jordan will be renamed London Church Crossing next year as well, he said.

A major rehabilitation brings with it a new image and a new beginning for the property, Jagnandan said about the name change.

This will be a limited partnership and not as much under HUD control as in the past, Jagnandan said. It creates a public-private partnership.

“It's a new way of doing business with limited funding from HUD,” he said.

This will set the tone for where Jagnandan plans to take the housing authority, and he has his board's support, he said.

“My intention is to get it all away from HUD and to put it under private partnerships – the public housing portions,” Jagnandan said of the 781 units of public housing. “I've got a plan for all of it. I'm announcing it piece by piece.”

The housing authority is actively moving toward limited partnerships, he said.

He's also wanted to tear down Whitfield Homes, the 300-plus housing area with older properties deteriorating to the point of the WHA closing 52 units.

Faced with aging facilities and reduced federal capital funds, the Wilson Housing Authority has been forced to come up with new ways of renovating or replacing its public housing, he said.

The WHA receives close to \$800,000 in capital funding from U.S. Housing and Urban Development each year but needs about \$7 million to make needed repairs and improvements, Jagnandan said.

The housing authority has multiple other projects in various stages.

FORREST GREEN

The Wilson Housing Authority has already made improvements with 68 newly remodeled apartments in the Forrest Green community. The \$7.2 million project, which involved energy-efficient construction, was funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. That project is attached to the Pinnacle Point project.

ANTHONY STREET

The 26 apartments at Anthony Street is the authority's first homeownership area where two-and three-bedroom apartments have been converted into condominiums and are now on the market for sale. The housing authority is selling two-bedroom units for \$68,000 and the three-bedroom units for \$73,000. Public housing residents have the

first option to purchase the units. After that, they will be offered for sale to the general public.

The renovation was paid for with \$645,645 in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds.

"That's going very well," Jagnandan said of the project.

He anticipates selling units shortly, perhaps before Christmas after he receives FHA approval.

EL RAMEY CIRCLE, FORREST GREEN

In January, the Wilson Housing Authority will ask the N.C. Housing Finance Agency for approval to issue another bond-funded project that would pay for the renovation of 40 units at El Ramey Circle, along Stantonsburg Road, and the remaining 117 apartments in the Forrest Green community.

"We don't know the amount yet, but it looks like it could be close to \$9 million," Jagnandan has said.

WHITFIELD HOMES

The plan is still in place to tear down the 311 units in the Whitfield Homes community but if a sizable grant source doesn't come through, the housing authority has another plan to renovate the area. The authority received a \$200,000 Choice Neighborhoods Planning grant earlier this year and plans to seek a \$31 million Choice Neighborhood Implementation grant with HUD. The funding would pay for the complete demolition of Whitfield Homes and the construction of new housing.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

All of the projects either in progress or being considered have been backed by the WHA board in an effort of the authority to meet current and future needs with dwindling funding from the federal government, local housing authority officials said. The WHA has experienced a 30 percent cut in capital funding during the past couple years and housing authorities across the nation are having to find new sources of revenue to pay for capital improvements.

"I've always been a guy who has thought outside of the box," Jagnandan said. "We don't sleep here at the Wilson Housing Authority. I'm pleased we've gotten such good support from the Wilson community."

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