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Cathedral Green is on 'aggressive timeline'

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HARTFORD—Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Hartford, seeing a growing need for affordable housing in north central Connecticut, has been addressing the issue fastidiously through the development of Cathedral Green, a supportive housing facility for families in the Asylum Hill area of Hartford.

The \$8.1-million-project will encompass renovation to 53,000 square feet of the former Cathedral School building. The objective, according to Rose Alma Senatore, Catholic Charities chief executive officer, is to create affordable housing with a spacious, enriched environment.

Ms. Senatore said Archbishop Henry J. Mansell, president of Cathedral Green Corp., wanted to renovate the Cathedral School as a continuing presence on Asylum Hill.

Owned by the Archdiocese of Hartford and St. Joseph Cathedral, Cathedral Green is a joint venture with Catholic Charities. "We're really grateful for their commitment and support of this project," she said.

The housing program recently received \$500,000 in tax credits from Connecticut Light and Power. "I am hoping that by September, we will be able to close and start construction," said Ms. Senatore, conceding that "it is an aggressive timeline."

The success of the ongoing planning process, which began two years ago, can be attributed in large part to the cooperative efforts of the Asylum Hill community and the Catholic Charities Family Center.

Prompted by dialogue with the neighborhood, Catholic Charities began focusing its efforts on ways to provide clean, safe and affordable homes.



IN TRANSITION – The former St. Joseph Cathedral School is the site of the future Cathedral Green, an affordable housing facility for families in the Asylum Hill area of Hartford. (Photo by John Bohuslaw)

"We engaged in a lot of community outreach to determine what needs existed in the Asylum Hill area," said Ms. Senatore.

"One of the important things for us was to get community buy-in," Ms. Senatore explained. "So, as a result, we spent a lot of time having conversations with community representatives and meeting with families that already exist in the Asylum Hill area, and families that are part of our Catholic Charities family center. They were very, very helpful to us in identifying the need for affordable units for families."

Families were leaving the Asylum Hill area because affordable two- or three-bedroom units for

families were scarce, she said.

On Sept. 22, 2005, Catholic Charities selected the architectural firm of Smith Edwards Architects, PC, in Hartford because of its familiarity with the Asylum Hill area. By October, initial schematic drawings for the site were complete, and on Oct. 18, Cathedral Green was selected to be the future facility's name.

The 28-unit building will provide supportive permanent housing to homeless families, families at risk of homelessness or those falling 50 percent below the area median poverty level. Rental subsidies will be provided.

Families will be welcome to stay as long as they wish, providing

they meet tenant lease conditions and will be fully supported by the Catholic Charities family counseling programs right next door.

"Catholic Charities Family Center, Asylum Hill, is going to be the hub for the services that will be provided for these families," said Ms. Senatore. "Our goal is to assist them in getting parent skills, a GED, English as a second language or job training."

The units will range in size from 1,100 to 1,300 square feet. "Footage-wise, the units are a very good size for families," said Ms. Senatore. Some of the main features will include a study room for children in each of the family units, an external playscape for children, a community garden area and a community room that will provide an opportunity for families to celebrate social events together. Plans also include laundry facilities located on each floor as well as a room for families to gather as they do their laundry.

A property manager will handle on-site management, marketing, eligibility screenings and other related tasks on behalf of Cathedral Green.

Catholic Charities will head up a community committee consisting of Catholic Charities, the Family Center and community members. "We feel we will get a lot of referrals, and once families are eligible, they will come before this committee, which will determine whether or not a family is accepted into Cathedral Green," explained Ms. Senatore.

Funding has been provided in part from a state grant specifically budgeted to develop affordable housing on a statewide basis. During the predevelopment stages, Catholic Charities also received a loan from the Corporation for Supportive Housing. To date, \$7.7 million has been set aside

for the project, according to Ms. Senatore. "We also received half a million dollars from CL&P for housing tax credits for a total of \$8.1 million."

Catholic Charities agencies across the United States indicate that millions of Americans share in the housing dilemma. Indeed, many agencies report that the lack of affordable housing is the greatest difficulty confronting the low- and moderate-income families they serve.

"We know it is a great problem," said Ms. Senatore. "People in Connecticut are on waiting lists for subsidized housing assistance. This is no surprise given the cost of housing in the state."

Although it is not alone in its efforts to provide an affordable housing market, Catholic Charities is unique in its concentration on the affordable family unit development.

"Most of the dollars in the past, particularly federal dollars and HUD dollars, have gone for individuals. That is why this is a wonderful opportunity and it is a very exciting project for us," said Ms. Senatore.

Ms. Senatore emphasized that "providing safe, decent and affordable housing is fundamental to the well-being of people and communities." With this level of security in place, other social issues become easier to address.

"Our goal is to assist families so they become self-sufficient and ultimately take care of themselves," she said.

"It's going to be very exciting and will bring new life to Asylum Hill," Ms. Senatore said, adding that Cathedral Green will be considered part of the Cathedral of St. Joseph Parish campus, which also includes the cathedral, a rectory, the chancery building and Catholic Charities.