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Dueling developments threaten 'save and sell'

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For almost 30 years, the Housing Association and Development Corporation, (HADC) has been improving Allentown's housing stock and providing affordable homes through a partnership with city hall. According to Bob Wittman, HADC's resource development coordinator, more than 250 city-acquired homes have been returned to the tax rolls through HADC's "save and sell" philosophy.

In 2004, fire destroyed or damaged nearly every home on the south side of the 400 block of North Street in one of Allentown's poorest and most densely populated neighborhoods. After the city hauled away the charred debris, what was left behind was a muddy open space that became a magnet for trash and trouble.

David Evans, who had gone from HADC's volunteer board chairman to its paid executive director, didn't see a vacant block; he saw a phoenix that could rise from North Street's ashes, lifting with it an entire 24-block area. Evans' dream was based in his own background. Before joining HADC, he had been a building contractor and a Lutheran pastor. His vision has become the Neighborhood Partnership Program, and the North Street Project with its nine new townhomes, six of which will soon be completed, is its centerpiece.

According to a 2006 HADC report, that small street had 43 homes with 130 people in an area of one and three-quarters acres. The new townhomes will provide increased housing values, lower density and employment and benefits for the neighbors hired to build them.

The density and overall poor housing conditions of the "ring neighborhoods" have contributed to the decline of center city Allentown. As the percentage of renters has increased, quality of life has decreased. According to a recently issued report by John Kromer of the Fells Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania, "The deterioration of housing through crowding and mismanagement has become a ... challenge." Responding to the report, Allentown Mayor Ed Pawlowski stated that ideally, the city would create more stable neighborhoods through increased ownership and conversion of rental properties to single family dwellings.

In that case, it is difficult to understand the revised plan for Old Allentown, which, when announced at a July 12 public meeting and presented again five days later to the Planning Commission, was a project to reduce density by buying and converting 40 small apartment buildings back to single family homes. A July 22 story in The Morning Call quoted residents enthusiastic about the conversion program.

By Aug. 14, a news story reported that the conversions were being reduced from 40 to 18, and that 22



new townhomes, which had not been mentioned before, were to be built on the site of the old Hess's employee parking deck. Interviewed about the sudden change of plans, Mayor Pawlowski said, "It was kind of a last minute deal. I'm not hiding it from anybody." He went on to say the townhomes were added to the first phase of the project to solidify an application to the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) for \$2.5 million.

"Last minute deal" is an understatement; the July 20 minutes of the Allentown Commercial and Industrial Development Authority (ACIDA) board shows that Executive Director Joyce Marin outlined the OAPA project for rehabilitation and de-conversion of 18 row homes and new construction of 22 housing units. The document goes on to state that "planning for the project had been underway and that the agency became involved because the PHFA grant requires a non-profit partner." The next paragraph states that an agreement of sale for \$450,000 had already been signed with Pennrose Properties for the parking deck and that ACIDA board approval was needed to show site control for the grant submission.

Also going on behind the scenes, unknown to the press or public, was the maneuvering for millions of dollars in funds. When told during a meeting with HDAC that it was going to apply to PHFA for \$1.75 million to complete the remaining three townhouses of the North Street project as well as launch many of the initiatives contained in the "Neighborhood Partnership Program," the mayor refused to support it. And he didn't.

The PHFA grant was given to Pennrose Properties of Philadelphia to build 22 townhouses in a neighborhood where density is already an issue, and who, to the best of my knowledge, hires few Lehigh Valley employees. The grant was not given to HDAC, which may now have to wait to finish the townhomes that will lower density and raise hope in a neighborhood where hope is in short supply.

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