

## A new era at Uplands

by Melody Simmons

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This week, Wilbert Blander started packing his apartment for a short move back to the future in West Baltimore.

The 78-year-old retired warehouse worker will return to a place that he once lived, often in fear for his life, for several years. Only now, the Uplands is in the early phases of becoming a cleaned up, modern and safe community as it undergoes a \$250 million makeover over nearly 100 acres.

The eventual 1,100-unit development just west of Edmondson Village is preparing to welcome its first rental tenants, a majority of them in subsidized units, in May. Homeowners are expected to follow in market-rate houses next year.

It will be the latest step in a long, controversial saga at the site, but many are greeting it with optimism.

"It will be a beautiful place up there. It will have a fitness center, a computer network, a community lounge — everything but a swimming pool," Blander said.

That was not always the case.

The site once held the 979-unit Uplands Apartments public housing complex known for violence and drug dealing. Officials of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development bought it in foreclosure in 2003 and sold it to the city for \$10 in 2004.

Blander, a resident of the complex for 18 years, said he witnessed years of rough times.

"I seen killings there, I almost got killed myself," he said. "They started bringing in anybody without screening them well, and that's when all hell broke out. Drugs was everywhere."

After the city bought the Uplands Apartments, it started planning to demolish the complex and replace it with mixed-income housing. Plans call for tree-lined streets, walking trails and green space inside the new development that sits on a rolling parcel just off of Edmondson Avenue.

The city has paid about \$68 million for site acquisition, demolition, remediation, grading, realigned roadways, storm water management and utility upgrades.

### Plans delayed by lawsuit

Those plans got delayed by a class-action lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court by nearly 300 former Uplands residents, which resulted in a settlement agreement allowing 226 families to return to the new development, and then by the brutal housing crisis of 2008.

But developers Pennrose Properties LLC and Bozzuto Homes pushed on, and this spring, 104 rental units in the \$42.2 million Phase I part of the project are scheduled to open for leasing.



Construction is nearing completion for some of the rental units in Phase I of the development at the Uplands in West Baltimore. Rents will start at around \$950 for a one-bedroom and \$1,500 for a three-bedroom unit.

The cost to develop the rental units in the first phase is \$13.2 million.

Officials say 178 homeownership units will also be built as part of Phase I, at a cost of \$29 million. The price of the homes had not been determined, and the residences will be built as they start selling because of the soft market.

Phase II of the project is still in the planning stages and no cost estimates are available, city housing officials said Thursday.

Bozzuto officials did not return calls for comment.

"I think it is going to do great things for the area," said City Councilwoman Helen Holton, whose 8th District includes the Uplands site. "It will increase homeownership in the area, and it's going to increase stability. It will allow for a diverse, mixed-income community that is not there now."

Holton, who lives nearby, said she has watched anxiously over the past several years as the development was bought by the city, cleared and then readied for development that had a slow start because of the recession.

"It's been vacant for a number of years now," she said Thursday. "It was a big, empty space. After the demolition, we had to deal with the issue of keeping it clean and aesthetically intact, and just keeping people's hope and anticipation of something coming up. Once you could see structures coming out of the ground, it was 'yes, it's happening!' "

### **Pockets of blight**

Tony Cain, who also lives and works nearby, said Wednesday he is skeptical that the new development will be a total success because the development is surrounded by pockets of blight, poverty, vacancy and public housing.

"It's going to be interesting," Cain said, adding that upgrades also need to be made at the Edmondson Village Shopping Center across the street from the new Uplands.

"How long will it take to clean [the community] up and make it upscale?" he asked. "There is still crime and drugs here and they'll have to clean up the activity first. Down the street from the [Uplands] is the Woodington Garden Apartments — and that is a housing project. You going to mix that?"

Pennrose Development, based in Philadelphia, has for months been screening potential tenants for the apartments, which start at around \$950 for a one-bedroom and \$1,500 for a three-bedroom unit. The developer did not return calls for comment.

Cheron Porter, a spokeswoman for the city's Department of Housing and Community Development, said the target market is a mixed-income community, with a total of 210 of the units in the entire development reserved for low- to moderate-income families and individuals with incomes up to 115 percent of the area's median income of \$85,600 for a family of four. That leaves 72 units to be leased at market rates.

In Phase I of the new development, 62 of the 104 rental units will be held for residents who hold Section 8 vouchers, said Peter Engel, deputy commissioner for project finance and development for the city's DHCD.

Of those, 40 are for returning Uplands Apartments residents as ordered by the court settlement and 22 are permanent vouchers attached to the new development, Engel said. The other units will be market rate, although some will be subsidized through a state low-income housing tax credit program.

He said the mixed-income community that will arise in Uplands is anticipated to bring a new era of hope to the site that was once so troubled.

"This will help build the strength of the community. This will help build momentum there," said Engel, who has been with DHCD for four years.

"What we're seeing today is transformation — from a 100 percent HUD-assisted project that for years had bad management and resulted in the decay there. That kind of project is not what we

are interested in repeating. We are looking at a mixed-income model that brings a different future there.”

The future at the site was shaped, in part, by the class action federal lawsuit, said John B. Isbister, an attorney at Tydings & Rosenberg who litigated the case pro-bono for the former apartment residents.

Isbister said the lawsuit aimed to reclaim housing for the former tenants who were displaced when the complex was sold and then slated for demolition. Months of raucous debate followed between the tenants and the city over the rights of the former tenants, resulting in the lawsuit and eventually the settlement.

### **End has justified the means**

Isbister said this week the end has justified the means.

“The former residents were left high and dry,” he said. “I think there were a lot of people that felt aggrieved at the time about it, and didn’t think it was the right thing to do, but those getting the chance to return are anxious about it today. Everybody wishes there were more units available now.”

Isbister said that the settlement produced a promise of 285 units for former Uplands Apartments residents — and in a 2008 query of the former residents, 226 said they wanted to return to live at the site.

“They are eligible to get the housing opportunities,” he said, adding he is monitoring the development and leasing.

One of them is Blander, who said he is excited to return.

“I want to better myself,” he said of his hopes for the new townhouse he hopes to secure, but declined to say whether he has a Section 8 voucher.

“I understand I’ve been approved to move back.”

Of the new development, he added: “I think it will bring something positive to the area.”

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