

Group has plans for ailing apartments

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By **ROBERT LINNEHAN**
Staff Writer

SALEM A private group has announced plans to improve conditions at the crime-plagued Whispering Waters Apartment Complex in conjunction with the current owners of the Salem facility.

Independence Realty Group, led by President Otis Sistrunk and his wife, Vanessa, have teamed up with former long-time planner for Salem County Ron Rukenstein to revitalize the property.

City and county law enforcement and federal, state, and city government have also lined up to help improve conditions at the 34-year-old apartment complex located off of Grieves Parkway.

The Whispering Waters complex has been in a steady decline over the past few years due to increased crime and an unusually high number of vacant and uninhabitable apartments.

There are currently about 100 vacancies in the 276-unit apartment complex. Many of the apartment buildings have fallen into disrepair, and some are completely uninhabitable.

"We both have a vision to bring this property back to its former prosperity," Sistrunk said of partner Rukenstein. "Years ago, it was one of the nicer properties in the City of Salem."

Rukenstein revealed he would be in charge of the planning and financial side of the rehabilitation project and Independence Realty Group would deal with the management and day-to-day operations of the complex.

The development team will immediately begin the transformation upon securing funding, but no later than December 2007. It is predicted the rehabilitation of the complex units will cost about \$12 million and take about 12 to 18 months to complete.

"An entire needs assessment sweep of the 276-unit apartment complex will tell us exactly what we need to do," Rukenstein said. "We'll be focusing mainly on installing new kitchens, bathrooms, laundry facilities, and balconies in each of the buildings."

The goal, Rukenstein said, is to improve each of the 276 apartments and to establish a better, long-term standard of living for each of the tenants.

"We just wish to make the complex safer, secure, and more desirable for people in Salem County," he said. Rukenstein also serves as the current development consultant for the Finlaw State Office Building in downtown Salem.

The group plans to make extensive repairs to several apartment buildings at the complex that are currently uninhabitable. Improved landscaping, better recreational equipment, more public facilities, and improved security are also part of the redevelopment plan.

While many structural improvements will be made at Whispering Waters, a great deal of emphasis is being placed on enhancing the lives and long-term standings of the current and future tenants.

A future community center, designed to provide social services to the Salem County community, will be built on or adjacent to the site.

The Calvary Community Development Corporation agreed to join the development group to oversee and run the social services aspect of the community. The CCDC is a Pedricktown-based group designed to strengthen and revitalize Salem communities through the empowerment of individuals and families.

"We want to help the tenants of the complex become more accountable for themselves," Founder and Chairman of the Board of Calvary the Rev. Dr. Edward W. Dorn said. "We hope to motivate and show them there is another option in life they can achieve."

Dorn said the community center will try to motivate and show tenants how to improve their lives in the long-term. Teaching tenants how to become home owners instead of renters, financial advice, and guidance on moral issues would be offered to anyone at the complex or in Salem County.

"We take pride in Salem County," Dorn said. "I want to see it become better. These are our goals."

City of Salem Mayor Earl Gage met with the development team and threw his support behind the plan. Improvements to the apartments and the creation of family-oriented programs and activities, he said, will encourage resident participation and socialization.

"One of the primary goals of this project is to empower residents to positively influence the quality of life so that the result will be a safe, secure environment to live and raise their families," Gage said.

"Children will have the opportunity to play outside on safe playground equipment and the elderly and disabled will utilize the freshly landscaped grounds that will provide negotiable sidewalks and sturdy benches to relax on."

Salem City Council President William Sumiel also agreed that the rehabilitation of Whispering Waters will have a positive impact on the city.

"The city supports the positive revitalization efforts planned for Whispering Waters. We view any improvement to this property as a win for the whole community," Sumiel said.

The revitalization of this section of our community will be a true team effort between public and private entities, along with the residents, and I look forward to seeing the positive outcome of this venture."

With all of the proposed improvements, Sistrunk said the apartment complex would be experiencing a rebirth. With any rebirth, he said, a new name is in order.

The improved complex will be renamed The Eagle's Nest Apartments at Salem.