

City council OKs resolutions to back work at apartments

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SALEM A step forward was taken for the rights of Whispering Waters tenants Monday night when Salem City Council approved several resolutions to allow Independence Realty Group to move forward with a plan to improve living conditions at the deteriorating apartment complex.

All members present at Monday night's council meeting voted in favor of the resolutions. The only member not in attendance at the meeting was Councilman Jim Waddington.

Independence Realty Group, led by president Otis Sistrunk and his wife Vanessa, will team up with the development consultant for the Finlaw State Office Building project and former county planner Ron Rukenstein to revitalize the property.

The Whispering Waters complex on Grieves Parkway 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.

The Calvary Community Development Corporation, founded by the Rev. Dr. Edward W. Dorn, also 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.

Rukenstein, Sistrunk, and Dorn were in attendance Monday night to listen to council and members of the audience as they discussed the positive and negative aspects of the revitalization project.

Lyetta Spencer, a six-year tenant of Whispering Waters, praised the group for their proposed rehabilitation project.

"We've asked for help for so many years and it never seems to come," she said. "We have a lot of good people in Whispering Waters, we're not all bad seeds. We need help. A lot of people living there are scared of the elements that live next door to them, we just need help."

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 included in the redevelopment plan.

While many structural improvements will be made at Whispering Waters, a great deal of emphasis will be 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 in or around the site.

It is predicted the entire venture will cost about \$12 million and take about 12 to 18 months to complete.

"The council and the mayor did their homework with this project. No one in four years has ever come to us and asked to improve Whispering Waters, this is a great thing," City Council President William Sumiel said.

"It seems in this city whenever a positive is suggested, someone immediately brings up a negative. This project is a positive, and I'm making it my recommendation that this project be passed."

While many people in attendance at the meeting were in favor of the project, a few members of the audience wondered why the council would make changes to one of the city's biggest ratables.

Chief Financial Officer David Crescenzi explained the previous owners of Whispering Waters were erratic in paying taxes to the city, which drastically reduces the value of a ratable for a city.

Mayor Earl Gage assured the audience this would be a profitable venture for the city and the project would vastly improve the lives of Whispering Waters' tenants.

"Financially, it's a good deal for the city and we're making out well, because in the end we all have to pay the taxes," Gage said. "The right course of action is having these new owners come in. They're local so they know what's going on with the apartment complex, and we believe they can get this done."

After the meeting, Dorn, Rukenstein, and Sistrunk met with members of the audience and members of the city council and thanked them for their support.

"We're looking forward to a renaissance in the City of Salem," Dorn said. "We're looking forward to getting Salem to where it needs to be. Salem is on the move."

The development team will immediately begin the transformation upon securing funding for the project, but no later than December 2007.