

# A different approach to center city

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*By MARK HAYWARD New Hampshire Union Leader May 28, 2012 Publication: New Hampshire Union Leader (Manchester, NH) Page: 1 Word Count: 666*

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**New look: Two-unit townhouse replaces two three-unit tenement buildings.**

MANCHESTER — City officials provided a glimpse into the future of Lake Avenue Thursday, and it's something more likely found on the outskirts of the city or even a suburb.

Spacious apartments are arranged side-by-side, rather than in up-and-down tenements. A 15-foot front lawn features grass and young fruit trees, not just a sidewalk. Cars are parked in an actual driveway, not a street or alley.

Such are the characteristics of a newly built, two-unit townhouse apartment building, which sit among the crowded, two-and-three story tenement buildings of the center city.

Completed just weeks ago, the building is a model for the transformation of the center city, development officials said Thursday. It was built to reduce density; it takes up two lots where

two three-unit tenement buildings once stood.

And its higher rental price — \$1,250 a month for a three bedroom — is designed to lure middle class people into the center city.

“The more we get these projects done, the quicker these neighborhoods can come back,” said Mayor Ted Gatsas at an open house held in a vacant apartments.

The location, west of the corner of Lincoln Street and Lake Avenue, is where three tenement buildings burned in early 2008. The address — 335 Lake Ave. — was the last call for Manchester police Officer Michael Briggs.

He answered a domestic disturbance report at a tenement building there. Minutes later, he was gunned down in a nearby alley. His killer is on death row in New Hampshire.

The project was financed through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, a program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that is administered in New Hampshire by the Community Development Finance Authority.

The city used \$89,000 in NSP funds to acquire two of the three lots. The city gave the property to The Socha Companies, and the NSP fronted Socha Companies a \$204,000, low-interest loan to build the townhouses.

President Will Socha said his company will own and maintain the building and lease out the apartments. Socha said he had to follow all city regulations — including setbacks from adjoining homes and off-street parking.

And city officials praised him for building just two apartments. While reducing density, it also makes the project less costly.

A lot of banks would not finance new construction in the center city, Socha said. “There’s a lot of great people here, although every neighborhood has its issues,” he said. If the city can find more development dollars, he said, there are similar opportunities in the neighborhood.

Some people look at the project with skepticism.

Sara Nagy lives across the street in a nine-unit building. She pays \$700 a month for her 2-bedroom apartment. She’s lived there a year, and has had her apartment and car burglarized twice. Her car has been sideswiped, and prostitutes and drug users roam the alleys, she said.

“I think it’s just in the wrong spot,” she said of the new building. Another drawback: neighbors had parked their cars on the vacant lot during snow emergencies, she said.

But Cheryl Mitchell, a Neighborhood Watch captain, said the neighborhood is getting better. She noted that long-term residents now live in several buildings, although she acknowledged there is the occasional drunk or rowdy young person.

This is the neighborhood where Armand and June Vaillancourt now live. Two weeks ago, they moved into the other unit at 335 Lake Ave.

June Vaillancourt said they sold their home at Ledgewood, a quiet retirement community off Candia Road, to move into the apartment. As retired blue-collar workers, they lived in the center city for years.

“I feel like I’m still living in my home, not an apartment,” June Vaillancourt said. She said the rent seems high, but she expects to save on heat and electric bills because the building is energy efficient.

She likes that the landlord will cut the lawn, tend the shrubs and plow the parking area. And she’s not worried about crime: police are around enough and the building itself discourages would-be burglars.

“It’s too nice,” she said, “to break into.”

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