



The ambitious plan to remake Wilmington's Riverside neighborhood

By LARRY NAGENGAST • NOV 30, 2018

It could take as long as 10 years for significant changes to take hold, but the start of a major revitalization effort is bringing new hope to the Riverside community in northeast Wilmington.

The multifaceted redevelopment, announced in mid-November, calls for creation of a high-quality, mixed-income community of about 400 units to replace an aging 293-unit public housing project, establishment of a cradle to college or career ready education pipeline centered on the East Side Charter School, construction of a new Kingswood Community Center, and development of a community health and wellness initiative. Project planners estimate an overall cost in the neighborhood of \$100 million.



Giving the redevelopment a major boost is an alliance with [Purpose Built Communities](#), an Atlanta, Georgia-based nonprofit that will provide free consulting services and technical assistance during the project's planning and implementation. [Riverside](#), bordered roughly by the Brandywine on the south, Northeast Boulevard on the west, the city line on the north, and railroad tracks and industrial properties on the east, is the 19th neighborhood nationwide to join the Purpose Built Community network.

An impressive array of institutions have already signed on in support of the project – the state, Wilmington and New Castle County governments, the University of Delaware and Delaware State University, the Wilmington Housing Authority, [East Side Charter School](#) and [Kingswood Community Center](#). The state's support includes a \$1 million grant to assist in planning. In addition, the board of directors of the REACH Riverside Development Corporation, the nonprofit created to oversee the revitalization, includes such heavy hitters as Wilmington real estate developer Rob Buccini, Delaware State Provost Tony Allen, Delmarva Power President Gary Stockbridge, Secretary of Labor Cerron Cade and former state Sen. Margaret Rose Henry, whose district included Riverside.

But the key to making it work is community involvement, says Beatrice Patton Dixon, a community advocate who spent part of her childhood in Eastlake, a public housing project across Northeast Boulevard from Riverside, and now serves on the REACH Riverside board. (REACH stands for Redevelopment, Education and Community Health.)

“It is my expectation that the community voices on the REACH Riverside board and in the Riverside community will be able to change the paradigm of having others decide for the community what is in the best interest of the community without seriously understanding or putting the needs of the community before those of the political and developer classes,” she says.

Logan Herring, Kingswood executive director and REACH Riverside CEO, is promising “a robust community engagement process,” one that actually started with community meetings to fill in area residents on planning before the Purpose Built Communities announcement was made.

REACH Riverside has already contracted with [Pennrose LLC](#), a Philadelphia –based development company that specializes in mixed-income affordable housing, to develop and manage the new housing, Herring said.

The next step, Herring says, is preparing a “master development plan” that will map out the housing redevelopment and other key components of the project. The plan should be completed by March because there is an April deadline to submit applications to the Delaware State Housing Authority for low-income housing tax credits, which Herring says are essential to making to project viable.

“Pennrose will do the master plan, with recommendations on where private investors can come in,” Herring says. “We want to make sure this is an entire community effort.”

While many details won’t be known until the master plan is written, Herring and Charles McDowell, chairman of REACH Riverside’s board of directors, say the most likely approach to the housing component would be to build the first phase on vacant land owned by Kingswood on the east side of Bowers Street, enabling Riverside residents who live on the other side of the street to move into new units before the old homes are torn down.

Patton Dixon hopes the project moves in that direction. She recalls how, about a decade ago, Eastlake residents were moved out of their public housing units to make way for the new Village of Eastlake. When construction was completed, she says, only a few of the former Eastlake residents were able to move into homes in the new community.

“If we scatter residents into a less cohesive situation, we don’t have as much ability to sustain the community,” she says.

McDowell estimates that the first phase of new housing would include about 120 units, with about a 70-30 ratio of subsidized to market-rate units. A 50-50 mix would be more desirable but less likely to achieve “simply because of the history of the neighborhood,” he says.



The current Kingswood Community Center is slated to be replaced with a new one as part of the Riverside revitalization plan.
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Demographics hint at that history. Riverside has a little more than 4,000 residents, according to 2010 U.S. Census figures, and almost all of them are living in poverty. Per capita income was less than \$9,000, nearly 40 percent of the adults had not completed high school and only one in eight adult males had jobs.

The second key piece of the master plan would be a timeline for constructing a new Kingswood Community Center. Kingswood is the social services hub for the neighborhood, housing a childcare program and a senior center as well as offering a range of programs for youths and adults.

As with the housing, Herring would like to see the new Kingswood built before the old one is torn down so continuity of services can be maintained. Likely sites would be behind or on the south side of the current structure, he says.

A third major piece of the plan will be expansion of the East Side Charter School, which now serves pre-kindergarten through eighth grade to include a high school program. McDowell, who recently completed 12 years of service on the charter school's board, says it will probably be three or four years before East Side is ready to file the paperwork required by the state Department of Education to request an expansion.

Also in the works is the creation of the [Teen Warehouse](#), a youth-oriented service center that would provide a variety of educational, recreational, social and health programs during afternoon and evening hours. The idea behind the project is to address the root causes of teen violence while enabling teens to make positive connections with successful professionals. Teen Warehouse would be housed in the former home of Prestige Academy, a now-closed charter school, at 1121 Thatcher Street. Capital One Bank foreclosed on the property earlier this year and, according to Herring and McDowell, is expected to donate the building to the Teen Warehouse corporation by the end of the year. The REACH Riverside timeline calls for opening the facility next fall.



The X Factor in pulling these components together is Purpose Built Communities, the nonprofit created by Atlanta businessman and philanthropist Tom Cousins and bankrolled in part by people like billionaire investment guru Warren Buffett. The organization has designated a community development organizer to work directly with REACH Riverside, providing consulting and technical assistance to the local group at no charge.

On top of that, according to Eytan Davidson, Purpose Built's vice president for communications, Reach Riverside team members will meet twice a year in conferences with Purpose Built leaders and with members of teams from the other 18 Purpose Built affiliates. And, Davidson says, REACH Riverside will be able to reach out to those other local groups at any time for additional advice and support.

"This is not something that's going to happen in two or three years. Ten years is a reasonable time to start looking for significant results," Davidson says. "Everything has to be done carefully, and done in

partnership with the community.... It takes time, and a lot of hard work, and people in the community cannot feel like they are bystanders” in the process.

The \$100 million bandied about as the revitalization’s cost is “a back of the envelope estimate,” Herring says, and currently the details of how the effort would be financed could be described the same way. The availability of housing tax credits will factor into the residential construction portion of the project. As progress occurs, organizers believe the area will become more attractive to private investors, especially those who see opportunities in the retail-commercial corridor along Northeast Boulevard. Delaware foundations and major businesses will be solicited. Also, REACH Riverside will soon begin interviewing organizations skilled in fundraising and choose one with the expertise to solicit grants from national foundations and major corporations.

The funding plan should be in place in next December or in early 2020, with groundbreaking for the first phase of the project anticipated in the spring of 2020.

Herring, who grew up in Wilmington and who has been Kingswood’s executive director for nearly three years, says he “understands the anxiety and fatigue [of residents] that comes with the discussion that has been going on far too long.” He realizes that some members of the community will continue to express skepticism and doubt.

Even so, Wilmington Mayor Mike Purzycki, who traveled with McDowell to Atlanta to see a Purpose Built Communities initiative there in January 2014, says “the community’s trust in this project today is miles ahead of where it was a year ago.”

“It’s a long-term project,” McDowell cautions, pointing to Purpose Built’s East Lake revitalization in Atlanta. “They started in the late 1990s, their charter school was built in 2002 and it took four or five years before it started to show good results, but the strength of the school helped attract more residents who are paying [unsubsidized] market rates for their homes.”

While it may take some time to see big results, McDowell notes that Purpose Built Communities requires its affiliates to establish goals and develop metrics to make sure everything is on track. “Each year you have to take the temperature,” he says.

And, Purzycki, who headed Wilmington’s Riverfront Development Corporation for two decades before becoming mayor, believes the Riverside project, while challenging, will be an easier lift than the Riverfront was.

“This should be way, way easier,” he says. “As I see it, the riverfront is still only 40 percent complete” after more than 20 years.

“People can tell there’s a different energy,” Herring says, “but nothing can compare to 2020, when we begin construction and people see shovels in the ground.”