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## CITYSPACE

### On the Right Tract



#### **A new development near Fourth and Diamond will help fill the affordable housing gap.**

*by Sue Sierra*

**Mural of the story: This wall decoration, at the McKinley School, brightens up the neighborhood.** Photo By: Mike Mergen

One evening last August, 10 women, an aged dachshund and a baby in yellow rompers gathered around a long table to eat pizza and review architectural drawings. The place? The Women's Community Revitalization Project. The occasion? Final design review of the Karen Donnally Townhouses, soon to rise near Fourth and Diamond streets in eastern North Philadelphia.

The corner of Fourth and Diamond has been hit hard by blight. The 300 block of Diamond has only a few buildings standing, and many of the houses on the side streets are actually abandoned shells that are too far gone to repair. But in March, ground will be broken for new rental homes that will surround the occupied houses and re-complete several blocks.

Like all of WCRP's projects, the Donnally Townhouses will be affordable to extremely low-income families. The target renter is a single mother with an annual income of below \$20,000. Because of Philadelphia's shortage of affordable housing, the group expects more than 300 families to apply for the 32 units.

WCRP is known for its participatory design approach, involving neighbors, current residents and future tenants to ensure that housing truly meets residents' needs. One early complex was completely redesigned because prospective tenants pointed out that a courtyard would be safer for children and allow moms to watch their kids more easily.

When WCRP's housing committee meets, the atmosphere is comfortable and informal. One family is represented by three generations, including a chubby-cheeked toddler. The room's occupants are strikingly diverse. Some of the participants are housing or design professionals, but most are residents of other WCRP buildings or of the neighborhood. There is pizza, cheesecake and friendly chitchat about children and family.

The housing committee has developed a model house with a list of desired elements including family-friendly features like washers and dryers in each unit so parents don't have to leave children alone to do chores. Project design starts with the model and with photos of the neighborhood, to "keep the existing look," explains Dana Hanchin, WCRP's housing director. "With this development, because it's on multiple parcels and filling in around some existing homes, we didn't want a suburban-looking project," she adds.

At the meeting, building plans and elevations are clipped to a flip chart at one end of the table. Overall, the project has a compact, urban feel, even with the off-street parking now required by city codes. The buildings are characteristic three-story Philadelphia rowhouses with brick façades. WCRP has made subtle modernizations, such as putting entrances at grade level to support wheelchair access, without losing the feel of a classic rowhouse neighborhood.

This is the fourth or fifth meeting, and many changes have already been made. Neighbors asked for a playground instead of the planned community garden. The layout of bathrooms and bedrooms was tweaked. At this point the details being debated are relatively minor -- how high should the windowsills be? Where should the Dumpsters go? Talk ranges over bathroom doors, ceiling height in the community room and closet space.

Two neighbors have come to get a sense of how the project will change their community. Annette Roberts, a dark-skinned woman with thick braids and a white tank top, wants to know if existing residents can get help to fix up their houses. "I'd hate to see new homes coming up and my house standing out like a sore thumb," she says. Hanchin promises to follow up.



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and points out existing neighborhood landmarks -- the church, the  
, the neighbors, initially somewhat skeptical about the plans, respond

and this will fill up the gap," says Toni Patrick, a block captain from the  
area. Roberts adds, "I was living in my house when [the neighborhood] was all built up, now I'm living in it when it's all  
torn down. I've been here for 37 years and never thought it would look like the old neighborhood. I hope y'all do  
whatever y'all trying to do."

The meeting wraps up. The cheesecake is distributed; some, inadvertently, to the dog. Now the design is complete --  
but if less funding is available or costs run higher than expected, the committee will reconvene to revise the plans.

It's all too easy to make design mistakes with the best of intentions. Suburban tract houses can be out of place in an  
urban context. We've all seen affordable housing that looks cheap and institutional. WCRP's community-based process  
and attention to high standards on a budget show it's possible to build housing that's affordable, high-quality and  
attuned to the city. More power to them.

*Sue Sierra is policy coordinator for the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations.*



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