

Cornerstone and California firm join forces to re-create affordable community

By: Kevin Oklobzija October 9, 2019

When Cedarwood Towers went on sale last year, Roger Brandt saw an opportunity for Rochester's Cornerstone Group Ltd. to again make an impact on lives in Rochester.



Refurbished and remodeled Cedarwood Towers was renamed Winton Gardens Towers by developers Rochester's Cornerstone Group Ltd. and Community Preservation Partners. (Photo by Kevin Oklobzija)

He was well aware that the twin-tower apartment community had, over 45 years, gone from community beacon to neighborhood eyesore.

"It was a disaster," said Mary Coffey, co-chair of the North Winton Village Neighborhood Association. "It was like a drive-thru with the drug sales, and absolutely little to no quality of life."

Brandt wanted to spearhead a revitalization, to provide affordable housing that longtime residents of the towers could enjoy.

Except Cornerstone Group was outbid. California-based Community Preservation

Partners (CPP), which has a nationwide portfolio of affordable housing projects, was chosen to take ownership.

Brandt wasn't quite ready to give up, however. Maybe the California firm would want local expertise, he thought. Then he learned Community Preservation Partners wasn't really a stranger. CPP is a subsidiary of WNC, a firm Cornerstone had worked with to secure tax credit equity in other Rochester projects like Carlson Commons and Tri Veterans Housing.

"So as I'm picking up the phone to call them, I get a call from WNC," Brandt said.

Apparently it was meant to be. Cornerstone and Community Preservation Partners served as co-developers on the \$14.5 million rehabilitation. The firms, as well as Mayor Lovely Warren, state Senator Joe Robach and county, state and neighborhood partners, took part in the official ribbon-cutting on Oct. 8.

The 206 units within the two 11-story towers on East Main Street have been remodeled and refurbished, as have the roofs, windows, elevators, courtyard and community rooms. An app was installed near the elevators that shows residents in minutes how soon the next bus or nearest ride-share vehicle will arrive. The name has also changed. Cedarwood is now Winton Gardens Towers.

"We want to make a difference and make the housing better for people who deserve it," Brandt said.

Many residents of the towers attended the christening on Tuesday.

"This is an example of how all public housing in the city of Rochester should be," Coffey said. "It's not just four walls, it's a good, healthy place for people to live and learn."

Elaine Spaul, who is serving the last of what will be a 12-year run on City Council, helped secure some of the funding for the project.

"You guys have saved the best for last," she said, referring to projects completed during her time on council. "Housing means so much. If you don't have safe housing, you don't have anything. You can't work, you can't go to school, you can't do anything if you don't live safely."

The renovation is an example of what the city needs more of, Mayor Lovely Warren said.

"You're taking the bones and actually reinventing and redeveloping it into the 21st century," Warren said. "There's a new computer lounge, there's a courtyard. And they did it all at an affordable rate. The important thing is there's no displacement of residents."