

A once troubled street in Providence, Parkis Avenue is being renovated as a showplace of Victorian charm

By Christine Dunn, Journal Staff Writer



Five years ago, Parkis Avenue in the North Elmwood section of Providence was home to rundown rooming houses contaminated with lead paint, asbestos and, sometimes, criminal activity.

“It was a troubled street,” said Michael A. Lozano, director of real estate development for Greater Elmwood Neighborhood Services. But the nonprofit agency has been guiding the renovation of virtually the entire street, with the aim of bringing a variety of “family-friendly” housing — affordable and market-rate rentals and condominiums — to the neighborhood.

GENS bought 17 North Elmwood properties, including 13 buildings and 4 vacant lots on Parkis Avenue, for \$3 million in 2003, according to Lozano. The purchase included most of the ornate Victorians on Parkis; several of the houses are included in the Guide to Providence Architecture by William McKenzie Woodward.

The agency moved its offices into one of the buildings, a pink 1888 Victorian at 36 Parkis, to make it easier to “keep an eye on things,” he said. The North Elmwood project, which is dependent in part on state historic tax credits, represents an investment of \$24 million, Lozano said.

Most of the historic architecture on the street is being preserved, although two buildings had deteriorated beyond repair and have been or will be replaced with new buildings. The new construction was “designed to fit into the grandiosity of the street,” Lozano said.

Housing units that are completed now, or that will be completed very soon, include 16 mixed-income condos and 30 mixed-income apartments on Parkis, plus 10 more units on Stanwood Street and Congress Avenue, Lozano said. When the project is totally complete, it will include 2 to 4 more condos, and 28 to 32 more apartments.

Of the 16 new condominiums created so far, 6 have been sold, according to Joseph McCarthy, the real estate agent handling the sales end of the project. Prices for the 10 units on the market range from \$129,000 to \$189,900. McCarthy is an agent with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Warwick.

Lozano said some condos are restricted to people making no more than 60 percent of the area median income (\$40,000 for a family of three) and 80 percent (\$53,000 for a family of three),

and three of the condo units have no income restriction. For the apartments, some are set aside for those who make no more than 30 percent of the area median income (\$20,000) and some have no income restrictions.

In addition to improving the buildings, the appearance of the street itself will be enhanced this spring when new trees are planted and other streetscape improvements are made by the City of Providence, using Community Development Block Grant money, Lozano said.

Green building techniques have also been employed in the project. Blown-in cellulose insulation was used to make the historic buildings more energy efficient. Photovoltaic panels will be installed on one house, and another will have a green roof.

“We’re designing and building to a higher standard,” Lozano said.

The Parkis Street redevelopment project will be a featured walking tour at the annual Rhode Island Statewide Preservation Conference on April 12. The conference brochure invites participants to “stroll along Parkis Avenue, part of the Parkis-Comstock National Register District, to discover one of Southside Providence’s most historic and beautiful streets.... Walk and talk about the strategic partnerships, community participation, and complex financing that make neighborhood revitalization possible.”

Lozano will lead the tour with strategic partner Carol Ventura, director of development for Rhode Island Housing. (see below, for details about the conference).

For more information about the rental units, contact Greater Elmwood Neighborhood Services (401) -455-0810, ext. 207; www.greaterelmwood.org. For more information about the condominiums, contact Joseph McCarthy (401) 487-1510; www.joseph.mccarthy@nemoves.com)

PRESERVATION CONFERENCE

West Side and Southside Providence will be the focus of the 23rd Annual Rhode Island Statewide Preservation Conference, to be held Saturday, April 12.

Historic preservation awards will be presented, walking and bus tours of a number of historic Providence neighborhoods will be conducted, and attendees will discuss historic preservation challenges, successes and strategies.

The conference will begin at the historic Trinity United Methodist Church, 375 Broad St., in Providence.

Keynote speaker Richard Longstreth, a professor of American civilization and director of the graduate program in historic preservation at George Washington University, will deliver a lecture, “Never Done: New Challenges for the Preservation Field.” His talk is sponsored by the Roger Williams University School of Architecture, Art and Historic Preservation.

Topics to be addressed in workshops and discussions include landscape heritage, preserving modern architecture, ethnic heritage in historic places, the future of the Cranston Street Armory and tax-credit projects.

Tours include walks through Providence's Armory, Elmhurst, Elmwood, West Elmwood, Trinity Square and Luongo Square neighborhoods; bus tours will include mill rehab projects and Providence's "northwest territories," Elmhurst and Mount Pleasant; and there will be a bicycle trip along the Woonasquatucket River.

The registration fee is \$40, which includes morning coffee, lunch at the Cranston Street Armory, and the closing reception at the Pearl Street Lofts.

The postmark deadline for registration by mail is April 4, but attendees may also register on site April 12. Registration will be held in the Fellowship Hall of the Trinity Church Parish House. To get a program or for more information, call (401) 732-1009, or visit www.preservation.ri.gov/conference.