

March 4, 2007

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

A Portland Community Forges a New Identity

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PORTLAND, Me.

AFTER Heidi and William Wood moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Unity Village last fall, they baked cookies and knocked on the doors of every neighbor in the 33-unit development.

They encountered young professionals like themselves who had looked for a well-managed building and reasonable market-rate rents in one of New England's hot small cities. But they also met Somali immigrants, single mothers and adults so down on their luck they had just moved out of the shelter up the street.

The couple, who are college graduates, and their neighbors reflect the economic, cultural and racial diversity that distinguishes not only Unity Village, which opened six years ago, but also the Bayside neighborhood, which is one of Portland's oldest, is still its poorest and is becoming its most unusual.

The neighborhood, which sits on a bluff behind City Hall and overlooks Back Cove and Interstate 295, is stirring again after decades of neglect that turned it from a prosperous 19th- and early-20th-century area of middle-class merchants to a place where city workers parked during the day and society's forgotten dwelled in the evening's shadows.

Now it is possible on the same Bayside block to eat a \$100 meal at one of the city's fine seafood restaurants or get one free at a soup kitchen that feeds 500 people daily. Residents here sleep in historic 19th-century homes, some worth \$300,000 or more — still a relative bargain in a city where houses with water views can easily cost \$600,000 or more — while transients can get a free bed at overnight shelters, one for men and the other for women.

On Bayside's south end are worn convenience stores with metal grates on the windows selling cigarettes and beer. On the north end is a new 47,000-square-foot Whole Foods Market.

To some longtime residents, the neighborhood's transformation over the last decade has been anticipated, but it is nevertheless striking.

"This was the horrendously ugly part of town," said Ron Spinella, an artist and gallery owner who is chairman of the Bayside Neighborhood Association and has lived in the community since 1996.

"The scrap yards are here," he said. "Buildings weren't being used. Houses were empty. But we also had more vacant and unused property than any neighborhood, in a city that was revitalizing very fast. So you just knew that the city's deteriorated back door could become its handsome front door."

The Bayside neighborhood is not at that point yet, but it appears to be on the way.

The question facing developers and the city, which adopted a Bayside redevelopment plan in 1999, was this: Would people with means, particularly college-educated professionals just getting started, be willing to settle in a neighborhood known for its soup kitchen, shelters and transients?

Unity Village, which cost \$5.25 million and opened in 2001, seems to have answered that question, city officials and residents say. In their view, it has served as an economic catalyst that has helped stabilize the neighborhood by providing shelter and a sense of community for those with rising fortunes, like the Woods, and those less fortunate. By offering affordable apartments in attractive town-house-style buildings just blocks from City Hall and the arts, central business and entertainment districts of the city, it has coaxed people of different incomes, backgrounds and races to live side by side.

"A lot of people didn't think it could happen," said Alex Jaegerman, the director of Portland's planning department. "Piece by piece, it's happening."

Mr. and Mrs. Wood, who arrived at Unity Village last September after she completed a graduate degree in social work from Smith College in Northampton Mass., said they were more than satisfied with their new home.

"We specifically chose Bayside," said Mrs. Wood, 31, who just landed a job as a clinical social worker with the Providence Service Corporation in Brunswick. Mr. Wood is a regional coordinator in New England for the Bahai faith.

"We were looking for a city that was close to the ocean, and a neighborhood that was as diverse

as possible,” Mrs. Wood said. They pay \$850 a month for their two-bedroom apartment.

Jennifer Guptill, a 32-year-old property manager and single mother, has lived in Unity Village since October 2005 with her four children in a three-bedroom market-rate apartment that rents for \$1,000 a month. That is hundreds of dollars a month less than similar apartments in the tonier neighborhoods to the north and west that overlook Casco Bay and the Atlantic.

“Outside of the fact that the homeless shelter is around the corner, it seems like they are making Bayside better,” Ms. Guptill said. “My vision is to stay here as long as I need, as long as it is safe and it continues to get cleaned up. The neighborhood’s improving.”

The neighborhood’s population is slowly growing. A century ago, Bayside was a densely packed community of stout homes that sheltered perhaps 5,000 residents. Urban renewal, though, scraped away many of the homes, replacing them with parking lots. Other houses were abandoned. The homeless shelters were established in the 1970s. The population dropped below 1,000.

Then in the 1990s, Portland, which now has 64,000 residents, the same number as it did in 1990, joined other New England cities in experiencing an economic and cultural revival. Upwardly mobile young professionals resettled the city’s seaside neighborhoods. Artists colonized lofts and old homes in other neighborhoods.

Bayside, with its ample open spaces and old homes ready to be rehabilitated, was seen by city planners as a place of metropolitan opportunity. With the help of Bayside residents, the city developed its plan to turn Bayside into Portland’s “urban gateway.” The neighborhood’s population is now about 1,400.

To accompany the increase in residents, Bayside is seeing a rise in construction. A 37-unit loft-style condominium is being built on Chestnut Street. Apartments will be priced from just under \$200,000 to \$400,000, numbers competitive in Portland’s market, which has cooled in recent months.

Avesta Housing, a nonprofit developer of affordable housing based in Portland, will open a 60-unit apartment building later this year on the corner of Pearl and Oxford Streets. Rents will be \$700 for a one-bedroom, \$840 for a two-bedroom and \$950 for a three-bedroom, including utilities. Work on a 105,000-square-foot medical office building is scheduled to get under way in the spring.

Unity Village, the first project completed under the gateway plan, was developed by Jim Hatch,

a nonprofit housing consultant, and Richard Berman, the principal of Berman Associates, a local builder.

Both men responded to the city's request to build on three city-owned lots that make up the Unity Village site. Winton Scott Architects designed the four three-story buildings. One-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments are on the ground floor, with three-bedroom units above. Each apartment has a front door and a stoop that faces the street. Because the project is in the central city, the designers minimized the number of parking spaces and maximized the development's density.

Seven apartments are reserved for families and couples capable of paying market rents. Seven other apartments are reserved as transitional homes for people moving out of shelters. The remaining 19 units are subsidized housing for single men and women and working families, many of them with young children and teenagers who are often found in Unity Village's community room during the winter, or on the Oxford Street playground when it's warm.

Unity Village has attracted national notice among public housing agencies for its novel layout and design.

In 2005, the federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#) awarded Berman Associates the Environmental Merit Award for significant contributions to environmental awareness and problem solving.

"These projects take stamina, patience and creativity," the award citation said.

As part of the area's transformation, industrial sites and junkyards are being removed.

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