



Josey Heights champions environmentally friendly neighborhoods

Going green

On the surface, Josey Heights would be considered an oasis rising amid Milwaukee neighborhoods that have survived elements of urban decay, including the razing of dozens of homes more than 20 years ago to make way for a Park West Freeway spur that was never built.

Given its environmental innovations, this development of more than 50 planned homes on 7.3 acres bordered by Lloyd Street on the north, Brown Street on the south, 12th Street on the east and 14th Street on the west promises to be a model for a new urbanism that is being championed by city officials and developers.

"It's an exciting project because it addresses a housing need in an area that has open space and includes the kind of environmental needs that we have identified," says Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett. Barrett not only helped officially introduce the project in late 2006, he personally poured a bucket of water on the streets to see for himself how the new neighborhood's specially designed permeable paving and bioretention swales will help Milwaukee's overburdened storm sewer system.

The new retention system is at the heart of Josey Heights, named after J. Anthony Josey, a local newspaper editor who championed housing and job opportunities for the city's early African American residents. Developer Gaurie Rodman of Coach House Development Partners Inc. says her firm sought out and won a bid from the city of Milwaukee in 2004 to develop the land with very specific rules.

"The Department of Natural Resources and the Department of Public Works said the standard would be for Josey Heights to have a storm water management like park land," Rodman says. "That meant we could not hook up to the storm water system."

After rejecting what officials first wanted, an acre-and-a-half-sized retention pond, Rodman's company was inspired by the local Walnut Way Conservation Corp., which has developed rain gardens and received hands-on help from the Conservation Design Forum Inc., a Chicago-area-based landscape architecture company.

The result is a sustainable storm water management system that includes permeable paving, biofiltration rain gardens and bioretention swales distributed throughout the site. Specifically, the system includes layers of sand, gravel, three to four feet of stone and a porous paver system.

"The pavers perform like any other street, so they can be cleaned and plowed," Rodman notes. "It gives a cobblestone effect."

The other effect is that the system is designed to save up to a million gallons of water from entering the city's storm sewers. "That is a huge benefit," Barrett adds.

Founded in 2000 by concerned residents of Milwaukee's near northwest side, the Walnut Way Conservation Corp. advocates rebuilding about 30 vacant lots and doing so with environmentally conscious projects. "We are happy about Josey Heights because of its design that brings the new homes into an existing neighborhood, because of its environmental efficiency and because of the process that includes this developer and the city working together," says Sharon Adams, a past president of the group. Adams notes that the effort of the larger triangular area bounded by North Avenue, 20th Street, 12th Street, Fond du lac Avenue and Walnut Street includes converting downspouts that previously fed into the area's sewer system to now feeding local gardens. The group also works with the city to focus on attracting new homes and businesses.

With the environmental system in place, the 37 single family and 16 town home development has begun. Two models are located at the northwest corner of Lloyd and 14th streets. Rodman says her firm carefully considered all aspects of the neighborhood design.

"We wanted all the streets to connect to the Josey Heights neighborhood," she says. "We wanted every lot to have a street face to it, so that you can park in front of your house and walk to the front door. It needed to have an urban feel to it so that it connects with the neighborhood. Josey Heights cannot become a gated community."

As part of that concept, the design includes a new street with a connection to other neighborhoods carved out of the middle of the acreage. It's Harmon Street, a continuation of the same street that ends several blocks west of the site.

Also connecting to the neighborhood, Rodman points out, is the close proximity to Lloyd Street School and the newly built YMCA. The area also benefits from an ever-improving North Avenue business district.

"We wanted to keep this a residential development," Rodman says, "because North Avenue is where the commercial development should remain and this community is in a great location for children to be so close to school."

Though the homes have a high-end feel, Mayor Barrett and Gaurie Rodman say the project is not intended to gentrify the neighborhood.

"Absolutely not," Barrett says, adding that the best way to build this and many other re-developing areas of the city is through a healthy blend of homeowners who truly reflect Milwaukee's diversity.

"There are quite a few prospective buyers whose families have lived here and they want to be here and in good houses," Rodman says. "You know, the sustainability element of Josey Heights is great, but people are not going to move here for that. They will move into homes they like, ones that can offer them the kind of space and amenities they want and need to raise families. The green part of it is an added bonus." ■