

Real Estate

A Condo Project for a Village's Seniors

A nonprofit group develops a 93-unit complex in Norwood.

By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

IT took seven years of can-do creativity and stamina, but this small town has found a way to keep its older residents from having to leave the nest. Opening soon on a 6.5-acre wooded site close to the town center: a town-sponsored 93-unit condominium building.

"I think something brilliant has been accomplished," said William Procida, 39, a resident who became development adviser for the project during one of its logjams. "This little town, population 5,790, pulled off a \$20 million affordable housing development, without outside assistance. And taxpayers didn't have to fork over a dollar."

Nonprofit housing development is uncommon in New Jersey — and especially rare in more upscale areas — but an exceptional sort of determination to do it seemed to emerge here. Norwood's longtime mayor, Gus D'Ercole; a retired Coca-Cola Company engineer, Bill Evans; and several dozen volunteers recruited from town churches were unflagging in their efforts, even in the face of hurdles and setbacks.

After the group managed to master the basics of the development process and then formally chose its builder, the man died. The selection process had to be repeated. And the complex matter of arranging financing for a nonprofit development still had to be resolved. But the commitment of those who wanted to build the project, Foxhill Manor, did not wane.

"We really wanted to do this," said Mr. Evans. "We really needed to do it. Before Foxhill Manor, if you were older and sold your house, there was absolutely no place to move. There are new homes being built, and they're all big. They all represent far too much assets and property for those whose families have grown."

"But people who live in Norwood don't want to leave. It is our home."

Mr. Evans said Foxhill Manor would be like a club for "people who have been friends all their lives" — and want to continue living in close proximity to one another.

Mr. Evans and his wife, who raised their four children in Norwood, are not going to move into one of the condos, which have two bedrooms at most. They have too many grandchildren to accommodate, he said. Mayor D'Ercole, who is 68 and has lived in

NORWOOD



John W. Wheeler for The New York Times

William Procida, Robert Pascucci and Bill Evans at Foxhill Manor, expected to open before the year ends.

town for 61 years, isn't moving either. "My wife will never leave her house," he said.

Nevertheless, they are among those who were instrumental in getting input from Norwood residents on what kind of condominium apartments they would find attractive. Mr. Evans sent a committee of volunteers to tour all multifamily dwellings opening in the area. The group identified the quietest heating and cooling system it could find — and put it into the specifications for building Foxhill. Another committee was responsible for getting tiled bathrooms removed from the proposals, after meeting with elderly women who said they did not want to get on hands and knees to clean tile.

A nonprofit group, set up as a 501-C4 organization under federal tax law, was established to be the formal developer of the project. Mr. Evans was named president of the organization after Mayor D'Ercole visited local churches looking for volunteers — and Mr. Evans stepped forward from among the Presbyterians.

The project began as a gleam in the mayor's eye as far back as 1987, he said. At the time the town was building a low-and-moderate-income apartment building, in the wake of the Mount Laurel court ruling specifying towns' responsibility to provide housing diversity. "We built 48 units on some town land in Foxhill," which is a wooded

area of town with several streams running through it, Mr. D'Ercole said. "I told myself right then that the spot across the street should be for senior housing."

A 6.5-acre property was eventually formally turned over to the nonprofit group after town boards approved a 99-year lease at the price of \$1 per year.

The nonprofit group established rules of eligibility for people to purchase condos at Foxhill Manor. "We didn't take any public funds so we could do everything just the way we decided to," Mr. Evans said.

AFEW people who worked hard on the planning were allowed first pick of the units available, Mr. Evans said. After that, purchase was offered in an order of preference that gave first choice to town residents age 65 and older; next, residents 55 to 64; and then previous residents and immediate family of residents.

Sixty units, available in various designs, sold within six months. Now, the remaining 33 units are being offered to seniors without ties to Norwood.

The units are priced at \$125,000 to \$200,000, below market price, partly because the land was donated. Some of the saving on land costs was funneled into construction of an underground parking garage below the three-story building, said Robert

Pascucci, president of the builder, Jobco.

"We have a great deal of experience constructing affordable housing," said Mr. Pascucci, whose company specializes in apartments for empty-nesters and has built both subsidized and unsubsidized complexes in the region. "Even though this wasn't a project done with public funds, we were wearing our public works hat on this one."

The units, which were designed by Harsen & Johns Architects of Maywood, vary widely in size, ranging from a few small studios to two-bedroom units of up to 1,296 square feet — all accessible via gurney-size elevators. Standard features include open kitchens, private balconies, wall-to-wall carpeting, storage space and large closets. There is an activity room and an exercise room in the complex.

Foxhill residents will pay property taxes, but only on their individual units, not the value of the land or public spaces.

Mr. Procida, chairman and chief executive of Palisades Financial, a real estate investment and advisory services firm based in Englewood Cliffs, became involved two years ago, at a point where it looked as if the project might never turn into bricks and mortar. At the time, Mr. Evans's group had selected as the complex's builder Joseph Minetto, who had put up several multifamily buildings in the Palisades area that

were considered high-quality. But Mr. Minetto died suddenly at a point that Mr. Evans was struggling to obtain financing. "I put together a dog-and-pony show and we interviewed at 13 banks," Mr. Evans said.

"Every financial institution we met with over the course of 18 months liked the project very much and understood its value," he said. "However, none were able to provide us with the necessary funding because, as a not-for-profit, we lacked any equity in the project. That was the case until Palisades Financial came into the picture."

Mr. Procida, who heard about the situation from several elderly women who take the path through his backyard to Norwood's Catholic church, stepped up to act as relief pitcher, as he puts it. He took a fee for his work, Mr. Procida said — but not his "regular" fee. He was able to arrange \$16.7 million in financing for the project from J. P. Morgan Chase Bank, with whom he had a 15-year relationship.

"Chase Manhattan was interested in investing in good-will developments such as Foxhill Manor, as well as starting new projects within Bergen County," Mr. Procida said. "We worked with our contacts at Chase to look at the obstacles the corporation was facing and helped them focus more on the potential of a unique product in a desirable area." Mr. Evans said it was relief to work with Chase, because it understood the complexities of dealing with a 501-C4 not-for-profit borrower.

Mr. Procida also worked with Mr. Evans in finding a new builder, which led to the selection of Jobco.

Mr. Procida, who grew up nearby and has lived in Norwood with his family for 16 years, said he readily grasped why building Foxhill was important. "There are 20 guys I went to high school with who still live right here," he said. At Palisades Financial, "my partner — Mark Zurlini — is my best friend from Tenafly High."

Mr. Procida said he was delighted that "the ladies who come down the path to church are all going to live together at Foxhill." He added: "The whole choir is buying there. That's the way I'm going to do it too someday."