

First Worker Housing Nears Completion

For local wage earners making \$10 to \$12 an hour, finding decent, affordable rental housing in Columbia County is extremely difficult. Many of the rental units, particularly in the Hudson area, are so old and in need of repair that they are substandard, hardly places to live and raise a healthy family.



Crosswinds in Hudson

The Columbia County Chamber of Commerce understands the cascade effect a housing shortage creates for local employers. Without places to live, potential workers are forced to leave the area. Employers are then faced with recruiting from a shrinking labor pool or reaching well outside county borders, an increasingly expensive proposition for hourly workers squeezed by higher and higher gas prices.

The need for affordable workforce housing is a key economic and business issue, which is the reason two years ago the Chamber announced its strong support for Crosswinds, the new 70-unit complex on Harry Howard Avenue in Hudson that expects to start renting units by March 2008.

The path from conception to reality for Crosswinds was hardly smooth sailing. Like Copake Commons, another workforce affordable housing project still trying to win approval, Crosswinds faced some fierce opposition, particularly from neighbors who

did not want in their backyard. That controversy made the Chamber's leadership and vocal support of the project even more critical to Crosswinds' ability to overcome opposition and eventually earn the approvals needed.

"Getting support of the business community through the Chamber is very helpful, extremely helpful," says Kevin O'Neill of Housing Resources of Columbia County, the developer of Copake Commons.

Crosswinds was built by 3d Development Group, the same folks who built senior housing in Valatie, Chatham, Philmont and Stockport. It is their first venture specifically into workforce housing.

Rent including utilities for the one, two and three-bedroom units are \$575, \$660 and \$765 per month. All units have heating and air conditioning, dishwasher and kitchen appliances as well as hook-ups for a washer and dryer. They all are also wired for high-speed internet access.

In addition, there are community laundry facilities, an education room with computers, a community room with a kitchen and two multi-purpose rooms.

The rents are pegged to the median income in Columbia County. Crosswinds is targeted to those wage-earners with an annual household income between \$15,900 and \$34,250. A third of Hudson residents now renting fall in that range, plus many more around the county, as well as some who work in the county but are forced to live elsewhere.

"The need for this housing is

obvious," says incoming Hudson Mayor Richard Scalera, who supported the project from the beginning. "That's what you're elected for. It fills a void.

In a fresh spirit of activism, the Chamber helped shape the early debate about the project, defining the difference between workforce and low-income housing and starting the conversation about the need for worker housing, making it a community-wide effort.

"The Chamber took a leadership position," credits Bruce Levine, head of 3d-Development. He also expresses appreciation for Columbia Economic Development Corp., which put in \$100,000, "participating in words and action.

At a cost of \$8.5 million, the construction project has had a major impact on the local economy. The general contractor, Two Plus Four Construction from East Syracuse, has used several local companies, from Colarusso Sand & Gravel in Greenport and Paul Szafran Carpentry in Hudson to Dunn Builders Supply in Greenport. They have also hired half a dozen local workers as well as filled local motel rooms with their crews, who are also patronizing local restaurants.

"Having that project has been good for us in what has otherwise been a quiet year," says John Maiuri of Dunn Builders.

As chairman of the Chamber Board of Directors, Maiuri worked to pave the way for the project's approval, explaining, "It was easy for us as a company to recognize the value because we have a lot of workers who will be eligible. We've watched younger

folks struggle with home prices. It often takes a cash infusion they don't have to make a place livable."

Having a new option of nice, affordable rental units "is a small but significant step," says Chamber President David Colby, who lauds the "great job 3d" is doing.

For families with school-age children, Crosswinds has another benefit: it is literally next door to Hudson Middle School and just down the road from the High School and the Junior High that will be built on that campus by 2009. It is also close to John L. Edwards Elementary School.

What this proximity means is not only easy access for students but also for the parents, points out Hudson City School District Business Manager Daniel Barrett. "I hope by having families so close to the schools it will help with attendance and translate into greater parental participation."

He also notes that for the many school aides and custodians, it offers a new housing option.

Crosswinds Site Manager Susan Troy welcomes the opportunity to come into local workplaces and talk with employees about Crosswinds. Employers can call her weekdays, 9-5, at 851-9042. Employees can call 1-800-838-0441 directly for information and an application.

From the perspective of the Chamber, meeting the opposition head-on by raising awareness about the need for workforce housing has been a win-win situation. "We hope there will be more to come in the future," says Chamber President Colby.