

ODU Nonprofit Hopes Norfolk Groundbreaking is Just a Start

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NORFOLK - This morning, it will be only a few shovelfuls of dirt, turned over on one corner of a parking lot along 43rd Street near Old Dominion University.

But the groundbreaking on a 51-unit townhouse complex at the edge of Lamberts Point could be the start of something much bigger, university officials and community leaders say.

The townhomes will be a testing ground for ODU's relatively unproven Community Development Corporation, a nonprofit venture that may eventually reach far off campus to affect a number of westside Norfolk neighborhoods.

"Everyone is looking at us and this project," executive director Ann Grandy said. "And they say if - when - it is a success, you'll have people coming to you wanting to do business."

The townhouses, the first construction project the CDC has taken on, are aimed at providing affordable housing to city teachers, police officers, firefighters and other municipal employees. Already, two-thirds of the units have been reserved.

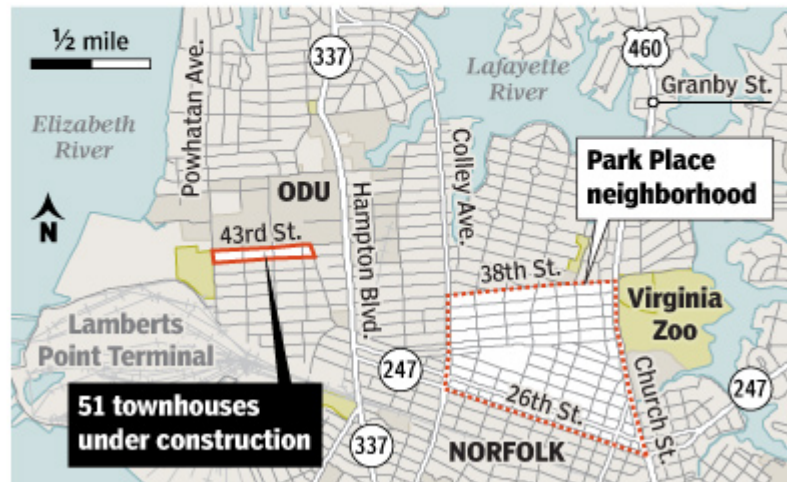
Construction will begin shortly on the complex, which stretches from Bowdens Ferry Road to Powhatan Road. The builders, Hine Turner Construction, hope to have the first phase completed by the end of the summer.

More important, the owner-occupied homes have the approval of the surrounding neighborhood, a level of agreement and cooperation that is unusual in town-gown relationships.

Instead of worrying that the university is overstepping its bounds, neighboring communities have embraced the CDC, suggesting future projects and vying to become the next spot for development.

DEVELOPMENT NEAR ODU

Old Dominion University started a nonprofit real estate arm to tackle some community problems. Today, it will turn earth on its first major construction project - building 51 townhouses for municipal employees in Lamberts Point. ODU has its sights on Park Place next and is working with that neighborhood to identify places for a second construction project.



SOURCES: ESRI, Tele Atlas

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"They've given the communities a solid voice at the table," said Rodney Jordan, a Park Place Civic League member who has joined the CDC's board. "They came to the community, they asked about needs, and one by one, the CDC has been working with us to address those needs.

"There is a real collaboration there."

Community Development Corporations don't just do construction projects. ODU's organization, the only one of its kind in southern Virginia, also hosts an annual Conference for Girls and Young Women, which last year drew more than 400 participants.

Grandy said the organization is interested in everything from development to education, from helping boost community services to building retail shops and housing units.

The corporation is modeled after a development organization at the University of Pennsylvania. Over the past 15 years, the Pennsylvania authority has been able to remake and reinvigorate large swaths of West Philadelphia, earning the university accolades for its economic development and its civic engagement.

Grandy said both are equally important at ODU.

"We are in an urban environment here," she said. "We're surrounded by neighborhoods. We're not dictating to them what will happen in their neighborhood. But we'd like to have an influence on the community."

The CDC has been working with Park Place, Lamberts Point, Highland Park and Kensington neighborhoods on assessing their needs and potential projects, she said. And residents from neighborhoods as far as Olde Huntersville sit on the board.

The development corporation has only one employee, Grandy, and will operate using grants and eventual profits from construction sales. No tuition money goes toward the project, and because it operates as a separate entity, it doesn't take away from the school's academic mission, President John Broderick said.

In fact, former ODU President Roseann Runte proposed creating the corporation and Broderick has embraced the idea as a way to further the university's influence and mission.

He noted that the city donated the land where the townhomes will be built and that the developers have worked with the school system to market the units. None of the organizations would have been able to pull off the project on their own, he said.

"I'd hope that the things we're trying to do with the city could become somewhat of a model," Broderick said. "Collectively, we can do some pretty neat things."

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