

Burlington County Times

Moorestown group has been a pioneer for creating affordable housing



By David Levinsky Staff writer

MOORESTOWN — It began in 1969 with some ramshackle townhouses on Beech Street. The rickety buildings were in utter disrepair with chipped paint, improper heating and plumbing and broken doors and windows. Some even appeared to be in danger of collapsing, yet they were all that some working families in town could afford.

Appalled by the conditions, nine local churches joined forces to form the Moorestown Ecumenical Neighborhood Development Inc., better known simply as MEND, to address the need for safe and affordable rental housing in their backyards.

It took the churches and their volunteers seven years to raise the necessary funds and complete the work, but by 1976 the street was completely transformed into an attractive 18-unit development reserved for working class residents.

The group was far from finished. Fast forward to 2013 and the nonprofit organization has built or rehabbed close to 500 homes and apartments in 26 locations across South Jersey with hundreds more units expected to be finished within the next two years.

In fact, some 45 years after the group was formed their mission is more relevant than ever.

“One of the unique things about MEND was it was formed five years before Mount Laurel I,” said Matt Reilly, president and CEO of the group, about the landmark state Supreme Court decisions mandated that New Jersey towns must provide the opportunity for affordable housing.

“It wasn’t formed because of the court decision. It was in response to local need by local churches. The expression ‘affordable housing’ probably didn’t even exist then, yet the (issue) has now been front and center for over 40 years and there continues to be a need,” Reilly said. “I doubt the founders of MEND ever thought we’d be needed more 45 years later.”

Confusion and controversy has surrounded New Jersey’s affordable housing mandates for much of the last four decades. Earlier this year the Supreme Court issued its latest order to the state’s Council on Affordable Housing, demanding that the agency rewrite its rules for specifying each municipality’s affordable housing quotas.

The litigation and debate hasn't stopped MEND from going about its work, breaking ground on new projects and rehabbing vacant homes, school buildings and other structures to become quality affordable homes or apartments.

Their successes have not only provided shelter for scores of working families, seniors and disabled residents, but they have also helped dispel some of the stigma surrounding affordable housing projects as havens for crime and poor property maintenance.

"The housing we've built is high quality, and we stay totally connected to our developments," Reilly said. "We try to be good citizens for the towns we're in and we're proud of the relationships we have our municipal partners."

MEND's original goal may have been just to address a neighborhood eyesore, but they're now proving that low-income housing can be an asset in the suburbs.

"We've been looked at as the suburban pioneer for affordable housing," Reilly said. "I can go to places all over the state and the people there have heard of MEND."