

Kevin Riordan: MEND's Matthew A. Reilly makes a success offering affordable housing



Matthew A. Reilly tries to engage critics of affordable housing, but adds, "I can only spend so much time defending what I think is the right thing to do." (ED HILLE / Staff Photographer)

By Kevin Riordan, Inquirer Columnist

President and CEO Matthew A. Reilly's office at Moorestown Ecumenical Neighborhood Development Inc. is in the basement.

His office door opens into a waiting room where tenants and would-be tenants gather. And that's exactly how this boss likes it.

"I hear their conversations. I hear their needs," says Reilly, 63, who has run MEND since 2001. "It's important for me to stay in touch with what's going on."

Founded in 1969 by the same nine township churches with which it remains affiliated, MEND is a respected provider of affordable housing. It buys, renovates, and builds properties, and rents them at below-market rates to income-eligible individuals and families.

In a sea of local zoning and statewide judicial conflicts about affordable housing for seniors, folks with disabilities and other needy people, MEND has local roots, attractive properties, and attentive management.

The combination has enabled it to thrive, despite dwindling sources of money to renovate or build the sort of apartments many need but many others don't want in their neighborhoods.

Despite evidence to the contrary, some homeowners fear the presence of even a small number of affordable units will destroy property values.

But there's no arguing with the demand; MEND's portfolio has nearly doubled, from 248 to 490 units, on Reilly's watch. In 2003, the organization began to reach beyond Moorestown and now offers apartments in Evesham, Medford, and Delanco, with more on the way.

"This is the community room," Reilly says, offering me a tour of the \$17 million Springside Elementary School redevelopment project in Burlington Township.

Most of the funding comes from low-income tax credits awarded to MEND by the New Jersey Housing Mortgage Finance Agency; the principal investor is TD Bank.

"If we get a tax credit award for our Duffy School project in Florence," Reilly says, "we'll start construction there in November. Fifty-three more units."

In Burlington Township, Springside had been vacant for six years and was fast becoming an eyesore on Route 541 before MEND approached the township, which ultimately conveyed it to MEND for \$1.

A new wing, and renovations throughout the existing school building, will transform Springside into 75 apartments, primarily for low- or moderate-income seniors.

The first tenants are scheduled to move in Dec. 1.

"We're excited about it," says Walter J. Corter, township administrator. "We know MEND, we know their reputation, and we know we're getting the highest standard possible. They have a proven track record."

The man who has guided MEND for the last dozen years is a lanky fellow with an affable but no-nonsense manner. Reilly grew up in East Brunswick and lives in Mount Laurel with his wife, Lorie, a pediatric nurse practitioner; the couple have two children.

Reilly's career includes stints in banking, as well as in affordable housing development in Newark. He's not surprised at the study, released Monday by the nonprofit Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey, which found the state to be the fourth-most-expensive place in America to rent a two-bedroom apartment.

"We have multiple applicants for the apartments we have already filled, and beyond," he says, adding that it was difficult to hear these conversations in the waiting room. "We disappoint people every day."

Reilly tries to engage critics of affordable housing but adds, "I can only spend so much time defending what I think is the right thing to do.

"I explain what I think the reality is, but after all is said and done, I know there still will be people with unchanged minds about affordable housing. So I excuse myself from the room and go back out and try and build it."