

Burlington County Times

Ground broken for affordable housing in Florence



Carl Kosola/Staff Photographer

Marcella L. Duffy School in Florence is being turned into low-income seniors and adults with special needs.

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By Sean Patrick Murphy Staff Writer

FLORENCE — Ground was broken Tuesday for a housing complex that officials said would fill the affordable housing needs of many.

Called the Duffy School Apartments, it will provide below-market rental units for low- and moderate-income senior citizens and adults with special needs. The project is expected to be ready for occupancy next spring.

All the apartments will be one-bedroom units with an estimated monthly rental range of about \$300 to \$800.

The Moorestown Ecumenical Neighborhood Development and its joint-venture partner, Conifer Realty, of Rochester, New York, held the ceremony to mark the start of construction at 225 W. Second St.

Barbara Strick, 68, lives in the Roebing section and thinks there's not enough affordable senior housing available.

"I'm interested in living in one of the MEND properties, and this is going to be energy-efficient, clean and new, and it sounds great," Strick said.

Matthew Reilly, president and CEO of MEND, agrees.

“Sadly enough, I think there’s more need now than there was when the churches got together and started doing this 45 years ago,” Reilly said. “It doesn’t end.”

MEND also opened the Springside School project on Route 541 in Burlington Township earlier this year. The apartments are all occupied.

“There is an enormous need,” Reilly said.

Charles Lewis, senior vice president for Conifer Realty, said the Florence project is part historic preservation, part redevelopment, and part affordable housing for seniors, and means the creation of at least 133 jobs while under construction.

Lewis said it is difficult to find affordable rentals.

“Rents are increasing at a rate much higher than salaries are increasing,” he said. “It’s a very bad problem that’s becoming worse.”

Mayor Craig Wilkie is enthusiastic about the project.

“The Duffy School has been part of this community since the late 1800s, and with today’s groundbreaking, we’re assured that it’s going to be around for many more years to come,” Wilkie said, noting that there are shopping strips and a bus stop nearby. “I think it fits real well into the community.”

Officials said 35 of the apartments will be in the old school. The remaining 18 will be in a new three-story addition that will be attached to the eastern side of the building, which fronts on West Second Street.

The elementary school, built in 1924, was an expansion of structures built in the late 19th century. The building has been vacant since 2007 and will be renovated and designated as a national and state historic landmark.

The \$14.5 million project will entail preserving the historic integrity of the structure.

In April, the municipality officially turned over the property to MEND for \$1, according to tax records.

The nonprofit MEND develops, builds, owns and manages affordable rental housing in Burlington County. Founded in 1969 by nine Moorestown churches, the agency has grown into an experienced agency in New Jersey.

For more information, call Conifer at 855-855-8954 or email leasing@coniferllc.com.