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Urging Inclusion in a Changing City

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BRIDGEPORT

THIS long-suffering city, the state's most populous and one of its poorest, is becoming the darling of developers. Three major mixed-use developments with the potential to transform neighborhoods and stabilize what is the highest property-tax rate in Fairfield County are moving forward at once.

City officials express hope that gleaming residential towers on the skyline and posh restaurants along the waterfront will signal a rebirth in Bridgeport.

Some community advocates, on the other hand, express concern: If most of the 4,000-odd apartments in the pipeline are designed to attract more middle- to upper-income residents, any accompanying rise in property values could gradually drive out existing residents.

"There's a growing recognition across the city neighborhoods that we're increasingly squeezing the folks who live here," said Marilyn Ondrasik, executive director of the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, a group of 80 community organizations for disadvantaged children.

Though the city's housing prices and rents are considerably lower than those in the county's suburbs, its stock of low-cost units is declining. According to a city-commissioned study of housing in 2000 to 2005, Bridgeport lost about half its apartments renting for under \$750 a month.

A housing policy proposed for Bridgeport's new master plan (which is still under review) recommends an "inclusionary zoning" policy that would require developers to set aside 10 percent of units as affordable housing. Such a policy has been in place for several years in Stamford; developers may build the units on site or elsewhere in the city, or may instead make a cash contribution to an affordable-housing fund.

Mayor John M. Fabrizi of Bridgeport has had an informal inclusionary policy when working with developers seeking city-owned property or tax concessions, said Nancy L. Hadley, director of economic development.

The proposed \$222 million redevelopment of a city-owned site downtown near the Harbor Yard arena will include 40 units of so-called work-force housing among its 300 rental and sale units, and 50 units of public housing, Ms. Hadley said. (More than 250 public housing units were demolished there in 2002.)

But the city's definition of affordability is at issue. An agreement negotiated by the administration for a second project — the \$1.5 billion redevelopment of the city-owned Steel Point peninsula — has drawn sharp criticism from some community groups and some City Council members.

The developer, Midtown Equities of New York, wants to build about 3,500 housing units facing Bridgeport Harbor, along with shops, restaurants, a waterfront esplanade and possibly some office and hotel space. The agreement, announced this month, requires Midtown to build 300 below-market-rate housing units in Bridgeport; 50 must be on the Steel Point site.

The agreement requires City Council approval. In a recent presentation to the council's Committee on Economic and Community Development, Daniel Pfeffer, Midtown's president, described the housing deal as a significant concession. He pointed out that his firm had stuck by the project even though it had stalled numerous times, and that Midtown was assuming all risk associated with cleaning up the site, which was contaminated decades ago by heavy metals left by factories.

Yet critics questioned why more affordable units could not be situated on the peninsula, which the city acquired through eminent domain, and whether any of them could really be called "affordable" in the first place.

James Holloway, a City Council member, said he had watched as low-income people were priced out of Stamford and Norwalk by revitalization and feared something similar in Bridgeport.

"Where are those people going?" Mr. Holloway asked. "Up the valley?" He was referring to the Naugatuck Valley communities north of the city.

Members of the local chapter of Acorn, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, organized a small protest before the council meeting.

Steel Point's 50 on-site apartments will be priced to be affordable for households earning no more than 105 percent of the overall Bridgeport area's median income, which for a family of four works out to about \$81,000. But within Bridgeport itself, the median income is closer to \$37,000 — far too low to buy these units, said Nicholas Graber-Grace, Acorn's statewide organizer.

"It's work-force housing without any of the Bridgeport work force covered," he said.

According to Ms. Hadley, Steel Point is not conducive to lower-income households because all units will be assessed at full market value, making the property taxes higher than they could afford. The developer will use part of the tax revenue generated from the project to repay \$190 million in bonds that will finance new roads and other infrastructure improvements on the development site, she said.

Trying to mix affordable housing into high-end developments is a tricky prospect for Bridgeport because it has so much “catching up to do” in its revitalization efforts, said Charles Buki, principal of CZB, the Alexandria, Va., consulting firm that conducted the city’s housing study.

The developer behind Bridgeport’s third large project — \$500 million to redevelop a 10-acre industrial site adjacent to Seaside Park, on Long Island Sound — says its plan does not have a big enough margin to support affordable housing. Unlike the other two, this developer, Westport Property Management, owns the construction site and has not requested special treatment from the city. If it were to do so, Ms. Hadley said, it would be asked to build work-force units in return.

Primarily residential, this development envisions 1,200 units in buildings of 2 to 38 stories. A marina, restaurant and boardwalk will all be open to the public. A standard two-bedroom unit will cost about \$600,000, a price beyond much of the Bridgeport market, said Stephen Grathwohl, the company’s principal.

“Bridgeport is bubbling,” Mr. Grathwohl said. “A lot of really nice things are on the drawing board.” But, at this point, “you don’t want to throw a monkey wrench in and stop things.”

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