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This new apartment complex will address Utica's 'pretty serious housing shortage'

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Published 5:14 a.m. ET July 6, 2023

A new apartment complex being built in Johnson Park in Utica will add 62 affordable apartments, some with supportive services, to the city's dwindling stock of affordable housing.

The \$28 million Johnson Park Green Community Apartments will include a three-story building with 51 one-bedroom apartments at 6 Johnson Park, and duplex-style buildings with 11 two- and three-bedroom apartments at 200 Square Street and 14 Johnson Park. It is being co-developed by the Johnson Park Center and Rockabill Development, of Hoboken.

All the apartments will be energy efficient and affordable for households earning 30% or less of the area median income. Half of the apartments will come with supportive services, provided by Johnson Park Center, for frail elderly tenants or for previously homeless tenants with a diagnosis of a serious mental illness.

The affordable units, expected to be completed in March 2024, are desperately needed, said Steve Darman, chairman of the Mohawk Valley Housing and Homeless Coalition. Utica and Oneida County have a "pretty serious housing shortage in terms of inventory shortage," he said. "There just aren't enough apartments. And that's at every rate."

People have started stacking up in emergency housing programs and shelters because there aren't enough affordable apartments in which to place them, he said. Back in 2002, the average length of a shelter stay in Oneida County was eight days because the population had shrunk and so much affordable housing was available, Darman said.

Now people might stay in a shelter for two, three, even four months or longer before they can get an apartment, he said.

The new Johnson Park units, once completed, will fill up quickly with tenants from area shelters and with tenants who are currently homeless, Darman predicted.

This is far from Johnson Park Center's first foray into affordable and supported housing, but its past projects, whether renovations or new construction, have been on a much smaller scale.

"For over 27 years, JPC has led the revitalization of the Cornhill-Johnson Park neighborhood and served the community by providing housing and services to aid the homeless, the elderly, people with emotional or mental disabilities and those in various stages of recovery from substance abuse," said Rev. Maria Scates, the center's CEO and founder.

The Johnson Park Green Community Apartments will continue that work, bringing more "eco-friendly, affordable low-income and supportive housing" to the neighborhood, she said.

Housing growth, housing losses

Back in 2015 and 2016, with new funding from the state, plans were laid out for 12 affordable housing projects in Oneida County, with 550 units now completed and Johnson Park under construction, Darman said. It looked like the area could build enough affordable housing to end the shortage, he said.

But that's not how things have worked out. "We've even more short of housing after building these 600 units than we were when we started," he said.

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So where has all the affordable housing gone? Darman listed the reasons for its disappearance:

Some have been destroyed. "We have fire after fire after fire," Darman said.

During the pandemic, with the eviction moratorium in place, many tenants simply stopped paying rent and New York was slow to implement a relief program for landlords. Landlords decided to retire and sold their buildings to new owners uninterested in affordable housing, or raised their rents — often from \$550 a month all the way up to \$850.

Landlords also lack support when faced with tenant issues and confusing government programs.

The population in Utica is growing.

New projects can't keep pace with the growing losses of existing units, Darman said. "Every one that we've built with partners fills up and has a waiting list," he said. "My guess is we could use another 1,000 apartments right now."

And the vast majority of new units are located in Utica and Rome, but the problem exists across the county. Not everyone wants to move to a city for housing, Darman said. But it's hard to develop sites in smaller towns.

Also, most of the new units have only one bedroom, two at the most, which doesn't help parents with several kids, he pointed out.

Johnson Park's project

The Johnson Park project, includes construction of a 12,000-square-foot community center at 1415 West St. with a food pantry and classroom space for residents and the surrounding community.

The green units will meet Passive House standards that can reduce energy consumption by up to 80%.

"The project's rigorous focus on energy use and performance will help protect vulnerable residents during climate emergencies," Rockabill President and CEO Niall Murray said, "and proves it is possible to build deeply affordable and supportive housing that is green, cost-effective, and replicable."

Operating funding for the apartments have been provided through the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative and the New York State Department of Health. Financing has come from federal low-income housing tax credits, solar tax credit equity, New York State Homes and Community Renewal, the New York State Office of Temporary Disability Assistance and NYSERA incentives.

The City of Utica is providing a \$1.5 million subsidy and the Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties contributed \$250,000.

