A new start for Oak Courts; $13.2M in renovations begin

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(Section A)

GREENFIELD — Heidi Stone and Brian Leeks couldn’t stop smiling Friday morning as they watched the state and local officials lower golden shovels into the ground during a symbolic groundbreaking that marked the start of the $13.2 million Oak Courts renovation.

“I’m so excited,” said Stone, who has lived in Oak Courts off the Street for the past three years.

“Unlike going to be a couple of the first residents to move into new apartments,” said Leeks, with who she’s lived there for five years.

Stone said her 5- and 6-year-old children are also excited, especially about the new playground that will be built on the property.

Leeks said her 5-year-old isn’t quite talking about it.

Stone said she’s hoping the most looks forward to is an energy efficient apartment, while Leeks said she can’t wait to cook on a new stove.

The much-needed renovations that families at Oak Courts have been talking about a decade have finally begun thanks to Greenfield Housing Authority Executive Director John P. Chartier, who said he’s proud and happy to be a part of it.

The local housing authority manages the low-income housing development and secured funding for the project through the state Department of Housing and Community Development.

Chartier said who he became director in 2010, the project had been awarded $4.8 million by the state to renovate kitchens and bathrooms in 74 of the apartments.

By early this year, the amount was raised to $11.9 million, and most recently the project ended up with $13.2 million.

“We weren’t going to be able to get much done with $4.2 million,” said Chartier. “Now, we will have a state-of-the-art development with energy efficient apartments, new plumbing systems, newly renovated kitchens and baths, new, taking all of the buildings, and a new common room and learning center with computers.”

Sean Stanley Rosenzweig, who voted for the project, said he was thrilled to learn Oak Courts would have a community learning center where children could get help with their homework.

Rosenzweig said he also happy that every apartment will be energy efficient.

“A learning center couldn’t be more important and energy efficient apartments are going to save residents a lot of money,” he said.

Mayor William Martin, said he was impressed with the manner in which the local housing authority has taken into the town with Oak Courts.

“This is a result of a dedicated group of people,” he said. “They worked on the project, overcome all obstacles and reached its goal. This is a great win for Greenfield and its citizens.”

Franklin County Sheriff Christopher Donahue, who also voted for the money for the project when he was a state legislator, joined in the groundbreaking.

Påstman I Town Councilor William Kiley, Påstman I Councilor Norman Kipfer and Påstman II Councilor Patrick Devlin were all there Friday to show their support and cheer the project on.

A total of 74 apartments will be renovated, two of which will be a duplex and will be fully accessible.

Those people deserve this,” said Chartier, who told the reporter it’s time to get started.

According to the Green, renovations on bathrooms and kitchens throughout the development were last done in the early 1980s. They will all be updated and new wiring and fixtures will be installed in all of the apartments.

The apartments will also have new energy efficient windows installed and some landscaping will be done.

Chartier said the entire renovation project should take about a year and a half.

Each building will be re-sided with a fiber cement horizontal siding. They are currently sided with vertical cedar siding.

“They will look more residential,” he said in an earlier interview.

The renovations will be done in phases, with Phase II being the renovation of 15 apartments that are already vacant. In Phase I, residents will move into the Phase I apartments, and work begins on the homes they vacate, and so on.

Chartier said more than 300 people will live in Oak Courts when the project is complete, including a Greenfield police officer, who will live there with his family for a year, and provide security.

Chartier said most buildings have four apartments, while a couple have eight. He said 60 people live in each on average.

Many of the development’s building codes items haven’t been updated in years, so those updates will also be done.

“Many of our residents don’t make more than $12,000 a year,” said Chartier.

Andria and Tasha Dillman said it would be a couple of the first residents to move in, excited and ready for renovations to begin.

The couple also has two sons, ages 17 and 18, who will attend the high school.

“This is great,” said Andrea.

“We’re very excited,” said Tasha. “It’s going to be a big change when this is all done.”

Kerry L. Davis of Davis & Co. Architects in Springfield has and will continue to work with the Green to see the project through.