

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



Recorder/Paul Franz

Residents and community members watch as officials break ground at Oak Courts housing project on Elm Street in Greenfield. They are building a community center, an ADA duplex as well as renovating all of the units with new energy efficient kitchens, bathrooms and exteriors.



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GREENFIELD — Heidi Stone and Briana Locke could not stop smiling Friday morning as they watched state and local officials lower gold-plated shovels into the ground during a symbolic groundbreaking that kicked off the \$13.2 million Oak Courts renovation.

"I'm so excited," said Stone, who has lived in Oak Courts off Elm Street for the past three years.

"We're going to be a couple of the first residents to move into new apartments," said Locke, who has 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.

Locke said her 5-year-old can't stop talking about it.

Stone said the thing she most looks forward to is living in an energy-efficient apartment, while Locke said she can't wait to cook on a full-size stove.

The much-needed renovations that families in Oak Courts have been awaiting about a decade have finally begun and Greenfield Housing Authority Executive Director John P. Counter said he is 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.

Counter said when he became director in 2010, the project had been awarded \$4.2 million by the state to renovate

kitchens and bathrooms in the 74 apartments.

By early this year, the amount was raised to \$11.7 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 Counter. "Now, we will have a state-of-the-art (development) with energy-efficient apartments, new sprinkler systems, newly renovated kitchens and baths, new siding on all the buildings, and a new community and learning center with computers."

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

Rosenberg said he is 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 is impressed with the teamwork that got the local housing authority to where it is today with Oak Courts.

"This is the result of a dedicated team," said Martin. "It worked on the project, overcame all obstacles and reached its goal. This is a great win for Greenfield and its citizens."

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

Precinct 1 Town Councilor Marian Kelner, Precinct 9 Councilor Norman Hirschfeld and At-large 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 in a duplex and will be fully accessible.

"These people deserve this," said Counter, who hired RAC Builders Inc. of Agawam to do the work.

According to the GHA, renovations on bathrooms and kitchens throughout the development were last done in the early 1980s. They will all be updated and new carpeting 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.

Counter 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 I being the renovation of 16 apartments that are already vacant. In Phase II, residents will move into the Phase I apartments, and work begin on the homes they vacate, and so on.

Counter 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 few years and provide security.

Counter said most buildings have four apartments, while a couple have eight. He said 3.5 people live in each on average.

Many of the development's building code 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 Counter.

Anna and Vladimir Cobileanski stood with their 4-year-old daughter Annie on Friday, excited and ready for renovations to begin.

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

"This is good," said Anna.

"We're very excited," said Vladimir. "It's going to be a nice place when this is all done."

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