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June 2007

In Bergen-Lafayette, a canal runs through it

Jersey City neighborhood sees developer interest

By John Celock

Some New Jersey developers are banking on a downtrodden neighborhood next to Liberty State Park to become the latest hot spot in booming Jersey City.

Gentrification of the Bergen-Lafayette neighborhood, an enclave just west of the park and south of the Morris Canal, known for its concentration of 19th century residential and industrial architecture, is picking up speed. A number of new projects as well as conversions of old factories and warehouses are under way.



A 14-unit mixed-use project called Library Hall Lofts will have residences replacing old bookshelves.

The streets of Bergen-Lafayette lack the polish and flash of nearby Paulus Hook or Hamilton Park, other waterfront Jersey City quarters that are growing at a furious pace. Indeed, many of Bergen-Lafayette's frame homes still have bars on the windows and front porches.

But seven projects containing more than 1,000 units are under construction or almost ready to start amid the area's many blocks of elegant old brownstone townhouses.

The scale of new projects is slowly beginning to alter the look and demographics of this once blue-collar and slightly run-down area. This redevelopment may quicken as industrial areas around the Morris Canal get rezoned. It's a dramatic U-turn for a neighborhood that lost much of its vitality when nearby rail yards closed in the 1960s.

Landmark Developers is among the neighborhood's biggest builders. It has three projects under way: 180 loft condos in a six-story conversion at 125 Monitor Street, 245 units at 101 Monitor Street, and 265 units at 100 Monitor Street. Affordable housing will account for 57 units.

"I feel there is a natural course of development and felt this neighborhood is the next wave," said Frank Cretella, founder and managing partner of Landmark Developers. "I am vested in this area. I own the restaurant in Liberty State Park."

To draw customers who otherwise might be inclined to buy property elsewhere in Jersey City, Cretella is including swimming pools, weight rooms, meeting rooms, wireless Internet access and even a climbing wall. He cites some of the neighborhood's features -- the park, its light rail station, the nearby Liberty Science Center -- as other strong selling points.

"We are playing to that active person," Cretella said.

On the western edge of the neighborhood, a 14-unit mixed-use project called Library Hall Lofts will have residences replacing old bookshelves. Larry Brush, the project's managing director, said the project will be completed by the fall, and that he has four contracts out on the condos already.

An area called the Morris Canal Redevelopment Area has several new residential projects. The area takes its name from the adjacent Morris Canal, a 40-foot-wide, 107-mile-long waterway built in 1832 to connect New York's harbor with the coal fields of Pennsylvania. Traffic on the canal stopped in the 1920s.



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Whitlock Mills is a two-building development near the canal. It combines a small new apartment building and the loft conversion of a three-story historic industrial building. The 330-unit rental project includes 198 affordable and 132 market-rate units. The development will offer one-, two- and three-bedroom units to families making between 35 and 40 percent of the area's median income, which is \$30,306 a year. By comparison, a waterfront resident's median income is \$74,016, with the median income for the entire city being \$41,639.

A third building in the area will grow out of the rehabilitation of another historic structure at 170 Lafayette Street. That four-story building, to be called Fresh Pond, will provide housing and work space for 45 artists.

More rezoning is planned for the industrial areas bordering the Morris Canal. The reclassification is expected to be completed within the next four months, and current property owners will be designated as the redevelopers of their sites. The rezoning is aimed at creating a community feel with more mixed-use residential developments. Robert Cotter, Jersey City's planning director, said the area may be granted historic designation as well, which already exists for Paulus Hook and other waterfront neighborhoods.

"We want to be inclusive and have real neighborhoods," Cotter said.

Crime remains a worry for prospective buyers. The steel-barred facades of some houses look menacing. One of the last residential projects the neighborhood gained was a row of federally subsidized Section 8 townhomes. Agents say until recently, married couples shied away from the area and that young single men, mostly first-time homebuyers, represented a large segment of potential buyers.

Others say the area's reputation for crime is overblown. New lights and playgrounds were recently put into Liberty State Park. But a 2005 report by the Jersey City Economic Development Corporation notes that perceptions about crime pose a problem for future residential development in the area. Landmark Developers is including space for a police station in a new building.

Cotter notes that the area is perceived as high in crime, but that Jersey City has a low crime rate for an urban area.

"There is a perception about criminal activity and the bottom line is that Jersey City's crime rate is low," he said. "We are the second-largest city in the state, but our crime level is the 17th [highest]."

The first residential project to come to the neighborhood was the Foundry, a three-story warehouse-to-condo conversion across the street from a light rail station. Developed by David Silverstein, the Foundry's first phase was completed in 2005.

Sales have been slow. Staff said it could take 18 months to sell the remaining units, which are a mix of one- and two-bedroom apartments. Prices run about \$400 per square foot. Similar apartments in downtown Jersey City are between \$450 and \$750 per square foot.

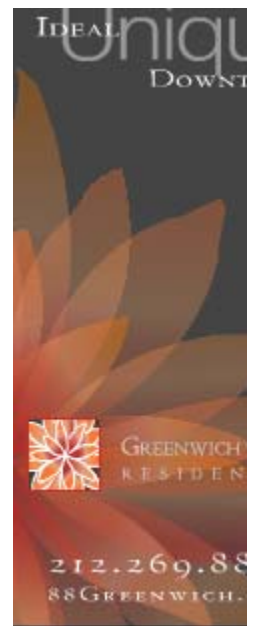
"Buildings like the Foundry and other new developments in Bergen-Lafayette compare favorably with new developments in downtown Jersey City," said Christoph Schluender, the Foundry's sales director.

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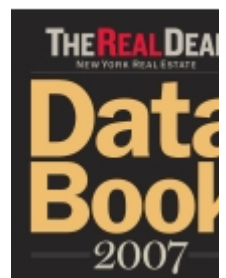
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