

Tenants Network News

August 2008

Cramped Upstate Eyes High-rises

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SUNY Upstate Medical University wants to take over Townsend Tower and Harrison House, the two low-income housing complexes in downtown Syracuse that have struggled with high vacancies, mounting debt and poor maintenance.

The medical university, which plans to turn a portion of the 14-acre Kennedy Square site into a biotechnical research center is negotiating with the city, Onondaga County and Empire State Development Corp. to obtain the two downtown properties.

The complexes, which each have 200 units, were built in 1973 with financial help from the state to provide affordable housing for low- and moderate-income people. Empire State Development holds the mortgage on the properties managed by Condren Realty Management Corp., a New York City partnership formed by the late William Condren.

For years, the complexes have struggled with high vacancies - both have occupancy rates below 50 percent. There are 76 residents at Townsend Tower and 86 at Harrison House.

Both buildings owe a total of \$1.7 million in city and county taxes, said Dave Michel, the city's commissioner of economic development. Discussions about the future of the complexes are preliminary, Michel said.

"We have no specific plans or proposals," he said.

A spokeswoman for Empire State Development would only say that the city, state, county and SUNY Upstate Medical University are discussing viable options for the properties, but there are no firm plans yet.

Upstate President David Smith outlined preliminary plans for the downtown complexes Monday during a meeting with 45 people representatives from the city, state, local housing agencies and community groups.

SUNY Upstate Medical University is looking at the three sites, including Kennedy Square, because it has no more room to expand.

The university needs to grow to deal with the region's burgeoning aging population, health care disparities between rural and urban residents and shortage of health care professionals. The expansion will provide jobs and allow the medical university to increase enrollment and attract more health care professionals, Smith said.

"We have no specific plans or proposals".

Cramped Upstate Eyes High-rise Cont.

The medical university wants to create a new physician assistant program, increase enrollment by 30 percent and build offices for health professionals and housing for medical students.

"We have no room to expand that's why we have a campus in Binghamton," Smith said. "How do we support the regional growth? Where can we expand our campus and grow enrollment and increase faculty? Some regional hospitals are closing, (patients) are showing up in our emergency room."

Economic development is the major goal of the expansion, Smith said. If the plan goes through, Smith said, developers bidding for the project will be required to hire women and minorities.

He stressed the plans are preliminary. The development of Kennedy Square could take about three years. SUNY Upstate Medical already has secured about \$35 million to develop the biotech center.

The plans for the downtown complexes could take about eight to nine years, he said.

"Townsend Tower and Harrison House are long-term goals, if it works out," he said. "We don't want to displace people. People's health is affected when they're displaced, and if we (move people out), we'll create more problems in our emergency room."

Community representatives at the meeting urged Smith and state officials to keep tenants informed about the development and begin identifying decent affordable housing in the city.

Rumors about the closing of the two complexes began circulating in December, said Twigg Billue, who was involved in the relocation of Kennedy Square tenants.

The city, she said, needs to start taking an inventory of its housing stock and begin redeveloping vacant buildings now so that Townsend Tower and Harrison House tenants don't have to scramble at the last minute as the tenants at Kennedy Square did.

"We need a game plan before this hits," said Billue, who works for American Friends Service Committee, a local group helping the tenants.

Roger Fletcher, president of the Townsend Tower Tenants Association, said some people already have started moving out because they heard rumors that the building would be closing.

"A lot of them moved mostly out of fear, because they don't want to be caught in the cold," said Fletcher, who has lived in the complex at 500 Harrison St. for 12 years.

Brian Babcock, president of the Harrison House Tenants Association, said residents have been asking him about the rumors. Babcock, who has lived in the complex for eight years, said he doesn't want to move.

Patrick Christopher, president of Condren Realty, said the complexes have stopped accepting new tenants. Meanwhile, several people have been looking at the properties for some kind of development besides housing, he said.

"We're hoping some kind of deal is made," he said.

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BUILDING UPDATES

Parkside Commons

Currently Related Management Company, L.P serves as the management for Parkside Commons (formerly known as Rolling Green Estates) Tenant Leaders and association members met with management and maintenance to discuss long standing issues with work orders and the untimely completion of such orders. The maintenance supervisor informed us that there is limited staff to address these issues and they are dealt with in the order of urgency. Tenant Organizer requested a copy of the budget for the property in order to assess the feasibility of hiring additional maintenance staff. Thanks to the efforts and strong leadership of the Parkside Commons Tenants' Association management has informed tenants' association that there is a 3 million dollar rehab plan in the works and the plan should be executed in March of 2009.

Clinton Plaza

Assisted concerned tenants with starting a new tenants association and advised them they should meet on a regular basis. We prepared a plan that will not tax the time and patience of members. We stressed the importance of having an agenda. There are long standing issues with the presence of criminal activity at the site and failure to address the issues with the façade. As well as safety and/or security concerns. A meeting will be held for the election of officers In order to be effective, it is critical that the majority of residents at Clinton Plaza Apartments be represented. Significant plans and decisions are often made without our consent simply because we have not mobilized. The Tenant's Association can influence the quality of life in Clinton Plaza by being represented at assembly and committee meetings.

Harrison House

After consulting with tenants and conducting a needs assessment and meeting with the tenants association of Harrison House to discuss the possible sale of the property and the future of the tenants' and their continued residency.

Townsend Towers

We have created a plan of action regarding needed repairs and the continued reduction of services due to the lack of office staff as well as limited maintenance staff. The Tenants' Association presented a list of requested repairs and service provision and submitted to the Department of Housing and Community Renewal and Condren Realty and is awaiting their reply. We held a meeting to discuss the possible sale of the property and what that means for the future of the tenants. University Hospital has expressed interest in purchasing the properties and creating student housing but no concrete plans have been developed.

Brick School Terrace

Consulted with steering committee regarding legal representation of maintenance and quality of life issues that management has failed to address with numerous requests. We are happy to announce that attorney Lewis Leibler from Legal Services has been a great support and we look forward to proceeding as planned to find an amicable resolution for both tenants and management.

Become a Member

Membership in the Greater Syracuse Tenants Network is \$5.00 for each individual tenant or supporter.

Tenant Associations are encouraged to join the New York State Tenants & Neighbors Coalition (\$25) and the National Alliance of HUD Tenants. (Information is available through the Greater Syracuse Tenants Network on these organizations).

We need your membership and donation! It helps pay for our website and mailings.

An additional donation would be greatly appreciated.

Greater Syracuse Tenants Network Membership Form

Name _____

Building or organization name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Telephone _____ Email _____

Membership \$5.00 Additional Donation _____

Make check/money order payable to:

Greater Syracuse Tenants Network
P.O. Box 6908
Syracuse, New York 13217

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GSTN Annual Meeting

The Greater Syracuse Tenants Network will be holding its annual meeting for members on Friday, August 22, 2008 at 6 PM at Park Central Presbyterian Church (504 East Fayette St, the corner of Townsend and E. Fayette). The purpose of the meeting is to elect members of the board and report on the activities of the organization this past year. If you plan to attend please respond by e-mail to SyracuseTenant@aol.com or by telephone to Bill Lee at 478-8438.