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CITYSPACE

Mixed Use



UPGRADE: the Mt. Airy CDC is in the midst of rehabbing this former home of the Mt. Airy Times *Express*. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

A CDC coordinator advocates for preservation and development in Mt. Airy.

by Sue Sierra

Bringing 24-hour life to a neighborhood commercial corridor is the Holy Grail of many community development corporations. In this design, sidewalk-level shops with apartments up top allow the business world and residential community to support each other. The stores are more secure with a 24-hour presence and neighbors can shop at their doorsteps. The mix of uses makes for a consistent flow of foot traffic on the sidewalks and a livelier streetscape.

But the task hasn't been made easier by the difficulty of getting funding for this work. Neighborhood revitalization programs have tended to be either "commercial" or "residential," even though successful neighborhoods and neighborhood main streets have a mix of uses.

Thankfully, the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency, one of the state's main sources of funding for affordable housing and neighborhood redevelopment, has recognized the gap and moved to fill it. At the urging of the Philadelphia Association of CDCs, Regional Housing Legal Services and a number of other groups, the agency has created a program that specifically supports redeveloping mixed-use buildings on neighborhood commercial corridors.

Mt. Airy USA, a CDC that has proposed a project called the Pelham Buildings, is one of two Philadelphia projects funded by the program to date. Founded 24 years ago as a joint effort by the neighborhood associations in East and West Mt. Airy to support the neglected commercial corridor of Germantown Avenue, Mt. Airy USA has developed storefront retail space, helped local businesses and just hired three "ambassadors" to clean the Avenue. Last year, Mt. Airy USA opened a new, 18,000-square-foot commercial space at Germantown and Hortter. The Pelham Buildings will be its first project involving housing.

Right now, the Pelham Buildings are all about potential. From the outside, the four connected buildings (totaling about 20,000 square feet) are a smorgasbord of architectural styles. The late William Lightfoot Price, an influential Arts and Crafts movement architect, designed two of the buildings; a third dates back to the 18th century. All four buildings angle away from the street, leaving interesting nooks that face Germantown Avenue. The Price buildings have terra cotta relief panels on the front and a checkerboard pattern of red-brown stone and pale concrete — and, unfortunately, an ugly modern facade tacked on to one building. Mt. Airy USA plans to remove it and restore the original look.

Inside, the distance between potential and reality becomes clearer. Exploring the buildings requires stepping carefully around decayed office equipment, abandoned tools and gaps in the floorboards. Some rooms reveal possibilities in high ceilings, exposed brick and deep windowsills overlooking Germantown Avenue, but there are also holes in the roofs and grime everywhere. There's still a great deal of work to be done.

Omar Brownson, Mt. Airy USA's director of real estate development, laughs as he says that "it takes some imagination. But that's what CDCs do." Mt. Airy USA's plan is for ground-floor retail and upper-floor condominiums, projected to sell for between \$90,000 and \$150,000. Executive director Farah Jimenez says the condominiums are filling a gap in the Mt. Airy real estate market. "We want to attract young families and downsizing older adults closer to Germantown Avenue," she says. "Right now there are houses for sale in the \$40,000 to \$70,000 range, and also in the \$300,000-plus range. There isn't a lot in between."

Jimenez says her organization's role is to lead the way for the private market. "Part of our work as a CDC is to establish that there is a market for things that private developers are afraid to do," she says. "We need to motivate private developers to follow our example."



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is a service and retail district. She calls the theme "health and home"
cal suppliers, design firms, and hardware and furniture stores. Phebe
ng, anchors the corner across the street. Mt. Airy Violins and Bows, one
ntry, just opened.

The restored Peinam Buildings will fit in well with Germantown Avenue's complex mingling of past and present. Phebe Commons, which opened last year, is across the street from an 18th-century cemetery. Neither looks particularly out of place. The street is historical, yes, but it is history with a comfortable, lived-in texture. In this neighborhood, history and the present day are integrated.

The neighborhood still needs the imagination Mt. Airy's staff talks about. Back in 1961, pioneering urbanist Jane Jacobs wrote that cities need "a most integrated and close-grained diversity of uses." This goes for city neighborhoods as well. Mt. Airy USA has had the vision to picture Germantown Avenue as a restored, thriving and diverse business and residential district. Indeed, it takes imagination, but that's what CDCs do.

Sue Sierra is the policy coordinator for the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations.



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