

A "Progressive" take on in-fill development

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The operative word in Sara Peck's new company - Progressive Housing Ventures LLC - is progressive.

That is what the well-known developer of single-family homes wanted when in 2001 she gave up the high-profile chief executive officer position at Rouse/Chamberlin Homes to form her own company with a special emphasis on in-fill development.

Peck was a management partner at Rouse where for 15 years she and her partners built more than 1,500 homes in communities in the Philadelphia suburbs earning awards along the way.

Peck was named as a "Woman of Distinction" by the Philadelphia Business Journal and the National Association of Women Business Owners. The company was also recognized as "National Builder of the Year" and "America's Best Builder" by a national trade magazine.

But by 2001, Peck was interested in going in a different direction.

"I wanted to be around for my kids and I was also craving to do something more progressive and creative and to go somewhere where we were wanted," said Peck, referring to increasing community resistance to subdivision developments.

With a background in urban planning, Peck's attention turned to in-fill developments - those little corners of downtown areas that have been passed over because of their proximity to train stations or tainted from environmental pollution.

"The key to doing this in-fill is that you have to invent the product to fit the land," Peck said.

After bidding on some projects that didn't materialize, Peck hit pay dirt with a small parcel of land in the heart of Downingtown occupied by a Quonset hut.

"It was a non-conforming industrial site with flooding problems. The seller just wanted to sell and get out," said Peck.

Around the same time, Peck went to a breakfast sponsored by the Urban Land Institute on in-fill development where municipalities could talk about their communities with developers.

"Brenda Brinton, Linda Baugher and Jeffrey Valocchi were there talking about brownfield sites in Downingtown. I was very impressed that they took the time to reach out (to developers)," said Peck.

A key ingredient in any revitalization project, according to Peck, is the attitude of local government.

"You really have to know the leadership in any municipality. You have to be comfortable and have favorable signals that the municipality has vision and competent staff and political leadership to accomplish the revitalization," Peck said.

She approached the borough with the proposal for Green Street Mews – a 30-unit condominium project on the corner of Green Street and Jefferson Avenue.

A year and a half later, having gone through a zoning change, a conditional use hearing and land development plan approval process, Peck is close to being able to start construction. One hurdle remains – the creation of the Alcoa basin, a stormwater retention basin planned upstream of the proposed development.

The borough is in negotiations with the Alcoa Flexible Packaging plant to purchase a 9.8-acre parcel for the basin.

Included in the proposed development are flood improvement measures that the developer will undertake plus provide financing to the borough to help with the cost of building the stormwater basin.

The condominiums are being marketed to young professionals buying their first home in a good neighborhood, a segment of the population that Peck feels has not been adequately tapped in Chester County.

This is the kind of progressive project that Peck quit Rouse/Chamberlain to do.

"I'm helping to revitalize a neighborhood. Aesthetically the condominiums will be an improvement (over what's there now). The borough benefits financially from the new revenue.

It will improve home values in the surrounding neighborhood. I've helped a borough prosper and it was creative," said Peck.

The developer has written about in-fill development in brooks and real estate trade journals. In one publication, Peck describes in-fill locations as properties that are either vacant or under-utilized locations in an area that is already developed. Some sites which could be well-located are deemed undesirable because they are located near active railroads or expressways. But Peck says a new breed of home buyer likes the convenience of walkable communities. Within suburban markets, Peck says there is extensive demand for housing for singles, people who have never married or are divorced. This market is looking for a residence other than a conventional single-family home. The new market combined with revitalizing overlooked areas creates new opportunities for developers with the added benefit that municipalities generally welcome them.