

HUD awards Norwalk Housing Authority \$30M grant to help rebuild Washington Village

By **ROBERT KOCH**

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NORWALK -- More than 100 people gathered at Washington Village on Monday afternoon as U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development officials announced the award of a \$30 million grant to help rebuild the public-housing complex at Water and Raymond streets in South Norwalk.

"In 2011, we provided a \$250,000 planning grant to the Norwalk Housing Authority. This resulted in local leaders from all sectors working together to put forward a remarkable vision for the future," said Harriet Tregoning, director of HUD's Office of Economic Resistance, "We were so impressed by this work that today I'm proud to announce that we're awarding a \$30 million implementation grant to Norwalk to help bring this vision to life."

The Washington Village Transformation Plan was one of four projects nationwide to be awarded an implementation grant under HUD's Choice Neighborhoods Program. The other grant recipients were Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Pa., and Columbus, Ohio, according to HUD officials.

The roughly \$110 million Washington Village Transformation project, undertaken by Trinity Financial in concert with the Norwalk Housing Authority and Norwalk Redevelopment Agency, calls for razing Washington Village and its 136 apartments along Water Street and building in their place 136 public-housing units, 67 workforce housing units and 70 market-rate units in two, three and four-story buildings.

The \$30 million grant awarded to the Norwalk Housing Authority will be used not only to raze and rebuild Washington Village -- the oldest public-housing complex in Connecticut -- but also to provide services to Washington Village residents.

"We don't believe that any child's destiny should be determined by their environment, by their zip code," Tregoning said. "Instead, we want to give every person access to ladders of opportunity by working with you to tackle problems and unlock potential in distressed areas."

Norwalk Community College President David L. Levinson said those services will include early childhood education, job training for young people, and on-site work at the Washington Village Learning Center. Other partners include Stepping Stones Museum for Children, Norwalk ACTS, the city of Norwalk, Career Resources, Inc., Community Health Center, Inc., and Norwalk Community Health Center.

Norwalk Housing Authority Executive Director Curtis O. Law, Deputy Director Candace E. Mayer and Washington Village Tenants Association President Raymond Dunlap was also present.

"We're going to be able to build the Phase One housing, so that the residents at Washington Village can see what's really available to them and compare it to other options that they have and decide if they want to stay in this wonderful, vibrant neighborhood," Mayer said. "And the housing will be storm-resilient. Every single apartment at Washington Village on the first floor during (Hurricane) Sandy was flooded."

Dunlap afterward also referenced Hurricane Sandy which struck in October 2012.

"Water Street is in the flood zone, so a lot of people lost things and we're still here hoping that with the money, they'll use it properly to get the people that live here affordable housing, so they don't have to worry about flood zones," Dunlap said afterward.

The plan calls for building apartments above and parking below to prevent flooding of housing units.

Several other Washington Village residents, including Helen Thorpe, expressed concern that they might not be able to return after the project is done.

"If they desire to come back, will be they be able to come back regardless of what their income is?" Thorpe asked.

According to the Norwalk Housing Authority, all Washington Village residents in good standing with the authority will be able to return.

More than a dozen elected officials attended the announcement including U.S. Sens. Chris Murphy and Richard M. Blumenthal, Congressman Jim Himes, state Housing Commissioner Evonne M. Klein, state Sen. Bob Duff, state Rep. Bruce V. Morris, Councilman Travis Simms and Norwalk Mayor Harry W. Rilling.

Rilling labeled the project "government in action" and a collaborative effort between the federal, state and local governments. Children will be among the beneficiaries of the transformation, according to Rilling.

"That's why we're going this, that's why we're here," said Rilling, pointing to children who left the announcement with balloons in hand.

Himes said the grant was the largest ever awarded to the city of Norwalk and will help transform the community. Blumenthal said the project will provide Washington Village residents bricks-and-mortar, educational services and "most importantly, a sense of belonging."

As a result of the project, Washington Village families will be able to cook breakfast in modern kitchens, get to work easier because of transit-oriented development and have access to educational services for their children, according to Murphy.

"That kid gets out of school and comes back here to an after-school program with one of the 70-some odd partners in the educational space that are committed to this transformation," Murphy said. "And then at night, the place is a little bit safer than it used to be because all of a sudden with modern buildings and better lighting and a partnership with police, you can guarantee that everybody can be out in the wonderful new community space that's going to be created here."

Said Murphy: "The whole day looks different with Washington Village is re-done."

Phase One, which Housing Authority officials say will begin in October, calls for construction of a three-story, 10-unit building and four-story, 70-unit building on the city-owned parcels at 13 and 20 Day St.