

How a Hartford housing project has turned blight into beauty for the Asylum Hill neighborhood

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Officials cut the ribbon at Clover Gardens, a four-building, 32-unit affordable housing complex in Hartford on Thursday. (Ted Glanzer)

Hartford — Sharon Castelli, CEO of Chrysalis Center Real Estate Corp., grew up in a family that had four rules: Do the right thing, not the easy thing; failure is not an option; keep the skeletons out of your closet and you'll never hear the bones rattle; and what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

At an opening celebration on Thursday, Castelli said she used all four principles when getting the new Clover Gardens Housing Project on Asylum Avenue in Hartford across the finish line.

It took Castelli, her staff at Chrysalis (a nonprofit that creates and rehabilitates housing in the state) and their partners at HARC, four years — during which there were several denials from the state Department of Housing, some opposition from the local NRZ in terms of the development and possibly who would live there, and the cobbling together of some creative financing — to complete the four-building, 32-unit affordable housing project. Eight of the units house individuals with intellectual disabilities served by HARC, Inc.

The one thing that Castelli did not do was give up on the project.



Sharon Castelli, the CEO of Chrysalis Center Real Estate Corp., holds a bee carving intended for Seila Mosquera-Bruno, the commissioner of the state Department of Housing, who helped usher through the project. (Ted Glanzer)

Castelli reached out to the properties' immediate neighbors to gauge support for renovating the four blighted buildings at 834, 846 and 854 Asylum Avenue and 1 Huntington Street.

”You know what they said? ... ‘We got your back on this,’” Castelli said. “There was a disconnect between the neighborhood group and the neighbors that live here.”

Shortly afterward, Seila Mosquera-Bruno took over as Department of Housing commissioner.

”She walks the walk and talks the talk,” Castelli said. “She welcomed me into her office and said, ‘What can I do to help?’ The first person in three years to say that. ... And here we are today. Four beautiful buildings around me.”

Castelli said a man who grew up in Hartford approached her and thanked her for seeing the project through.



The building at 846 Asylum Street, which is part of Clover Gardens affordable housing complex in Hartford. (Ted Glanzer)

“He said to me, ‘This building is not only a beautiful housing project, but it is going to be seen by all those that track into Hartford downtown to Mark

Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe. This building is not only going to make a difference in this neighborhood, it's going to make a difference in Hartford," she said. "He told me, 'Hartford is represented here today.'"

The celebration was attended by U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, U.S. Rep. John Larson, Mayor Luke Bronin and representatives from HARC, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Developmental Services and the state Department of Housing, all of whom took turns praising the project.

Bronin noted the condition of the properties before they were rehabilitated.

"These buildings were derelict and deteriorated," Bronin said. "They were a blight and they are beautiful right now. ... You can feel the difference in a powerful way as you drive down the avenue. It looks and feels different in an uplifting and powerful way."



The building at 834 Asylum Avenue, a part of Clover Gardens affordable housing complex. (Ted Glanzer)

Still, Bronin noted that the opposition to the project by some neighbors was rooted in the desire of seeing economic development in the area.

”Developments can be complicated,” Bronin said. “Neighborhoods’ aspirations can be complicated and vary. This is a neighborhood that is beautifully diverse and welcomes refugees from all around the country and celebrates the incredible spirit that defines the Asylum Hill community that believes in lifting up those who need some lifting up. It’s also an area that’s wanted to see some economic development and home ownership and I think we together should make it our mission to do all of that, to try to honor all of those aspirations and all of those values.”

”I’m proud of the fact this project involved a federal, state and local partnership,” Blumenthal said. “I have driven by these buildings I don’t know how many times. And I always wondered, in the middle of one of the great cities in our nation, in this neighborhood, at the center of this business center, how can we have these dumps right here with drug trade and everything bad going on here? Now I drive by, look at these buildings which have such historic grace, dignity and value. ... A picture is worth a thousand words.”



The building at 1 Huntington Street, which is part of Clover Gardens affordable housing complex. (Ted Glanzer)

”This is how things get done,” Larson said. “As a product of public housing and public education, these are the projects that warm the cockles of your heart. ... Sharon embodies the spirit that gets things done. ... It’s an honor to be here.”

The \$13.5 million project was funded through eight sources, including CHFA Construction, LIHTC Equity, the Department of Housing, a state Historic Tax Credit, and HUD.

All of the units are currently occupied, Castelli said.

”We’re very excited about the possibilities and see this as a very important step towards the transformation of our system, to a community-based, integrated support” model, Josh Scalora, director of business intelligence and analytics for the state Department of Developmental Services, said.

Many developmentally disabled in the state are housed in either group homes or some other arrangement. Developments like Clover Gardens enable the developmentally disabled to live independently.

Greg Calnen, the chairman of the HARC board of directors, said a resident of Clover Gardens wouldn’t stop talking about how excited he was.

”Just hearing the blossoming he’s achieved the last few months, it makes it all worthwhile,” Calnen said.

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