

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

## PLANS FOR EAST ST. LOUIS APARTMENTS ADVANCE DEVELOPER IS PROPOSING \$20 MILLION COMPLEX

Dan Mihalopoulos

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Richard Baron's development company has joined with a neighborhood group in East St. Louis to build what could become the biggest new market-rate housing development there in decades.

McCormack Baron & Associates and the Emerson Park Development Corp. applied last week for Illinois tax credits to finance a \$20 million, 201-unit apartment complex.

If approved and built, the Parson Place project could revitalize a downtrodden neighborhood near a planned MetroLink station at 15th Street and Baugh Avenue.

Plans call for 40 percent of the apartments to rent at market rate - perhaps from \$300 to \$550 a month for one-, two- and three-bedroom garden apartments and townhouses. Low- and moderate-income renters would occupy the rest of the units for a subsidized rate.

It's not yet clear what percentage of the project's cost taxpayers would cover. A development official involved in the project estimates that public incentives could total about \$8 million.

Henry Peete, vice president of the Emerson Park group, said he hopes that the new apartments will give long-gone neighbors - including his grown children - the chance to return home.

"I've seen our whole block grow up and leave," said Peete, a Tennessee native and 20-year resident of East St. Louis. "A lot of people who've moved from Emerson Park want to come back. People just loved it here, but they went to Belleville, Cahokia, Centreville because there's no housing in Emerson Park."

The proposed Parsons Place site is bordered by 17th and 20th streets and Baugh and Lynch avenues. When the MetroLink system is extended to Belleville Area College, the development would be near a new light-rail station as well as a recreation center planned by Olympic champion and East St. Louis native Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

Developers and neighborhood activists expect to complete Parson Place within a couple of years.

For now, the 47-acre site is largely vacant, except for about 40 single-family homes. Six-foot weeds, half as thick as sugar cane, grow in the empty lots cleared of abandoned, fire-gutted homes. Driving past the area on Interstate 64, motorists see a tangle of bricks, branches and blown tires piled high on a street corner.

Half the households in the neighborhood had an income of less than \$15,000 a year, according to the last census, in 1990.

McCormack Baron has built mixed-income housing developments like Parsons Place in some of the bleakest parts of urban America.

Among the company's best-known projects is in Cleveland's Hough section. McCormack Baron built there at what was the epicenter of the Cleveland race riots in the late 1960s.

McCormack Baron also developed the Westminster Place complex in midtown St. Louis, not far from the ghosts of Gaslight Square.

But building Parsons Place would rank "right up there" alongside the company's biggest challenges, said Barbara Jarrett, McCormack Baron's executive vice president.

"East St. Louis has not had much positive happen in a long, long time," she said.

Community Development Consultants Inc. has completed more than 50 new single-family homes in East St. Louis, Centreville and Alorton since 1996. The company, as well as the **Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance**, will also have a role in the Parsons Place project.

Parsons Place proponents said that they can count on the support of Mayor Gordon Bush and three of four East St. Louis aldermen. Bush couldn't be reached for comment last week.

At two public forums, critics have expressed concern for the homeowners that would be bought out to make way for Parsons Place.

Vickie Forby, director of the Emerson Park Development Corp., said that the project is not intended to gentrify the neighborhood. "Our goal is to keep the people who stayed during the decline in the neighborhood," Forby said.

The project will be built around some existing homes and a mosque. Money will be budgeted to rehabilitate older homes in Emerson Park. And those who will be bought out, Forby said, will have the option of moving into the new development.

McCormack Baron officials say they chose to work in Emerson Park because of the neighborhood's strong grass-roots organization.

Activists lobbied successfully to have the MetroLink route moved to the Emerson Park side of I-64.

Forby said the neighborhood group wanted to work with McCormack Baron because of the developer's track record of letting communities play significant roles in housing developments. The Emerson Park

Development Corp. will help screen tenants for Parsons Place and manage the complex.

Peete, the long-time resident and neighborhood activist, said that crime in Emerson Park is down. Still, there are few opportunities for shopping nearby, and a neighborhood school closed down for lack of students.

Peete believes that if people, especially younger people, returned to Emerson Park, then services such as grocery stores would follow.

By building in depressed areas, Baron has said that his company encourages further development. Likewise, Forby hopes that Parsons Place is a catalyst for rebirth across the rest of East St. Louis.

"We're really hoping to change the face of what people see as they drive by the city," she said. "If we can create a new edge next to the interstate, we can also create a new perception."

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