

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

A NEW LOOK for a venerable old city neighborhood

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* The neighborhood perhaps best known as the home of Crown Candy Kitchen is getting a long-awaited addition -- brand-new homes. A \$10 million revitalization effort in Old North St. Louis includes 37 new homes -- the first market-rate homes in the neighborhood in nearly a century -- and a host of other projects in a 30-acre area.

Residents like Jane Armstrong Smith welcome the changes. She was one of 36 people who moved to the neighborhood in 1978, hoping to stabilize it and start a branch of her church. "The neighborhood was badly broken," said Smith, 56. Many of the families who moved to the neighborhood with Smith are still there. In some cases, the second generation are moving back with their own families. Smith was single when she rented an apartment near where she and her husband, Bruce, now live in a rehabbed brick home. They paid \$33,000 for the 107-year-old house when they bought it 20 years ago. But the constant upkeep has them considering buying one of the new homes in the revitalization area, which stretches from Hadley Street on the east to North Florissant Avenue on the west. Benton Street is the northern boundary and Monroe Street is the southern. "We love it here," Smith said. "There's an astonishing collection of diverse people here. . . . But I'm not 30 years old anymore, and we're not especially handy."

Smith works for the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group, which, in partnership with the nonprofit **Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance**, is working to redevelop North Market Place. With half the land in the neighborhood vacant, the new development will represent the first new market-rate homes in the past 90 years, said Rachelle L'Ecuyer, project manager for the alliance.

"This is some of the oldest architecture in the city," said L'Ecuyer. "These houses are gems. But if we can fill in the vacant lots with good, high-quality housing, we can give people an impetus to restore some of the vacant buildings. When people sense a rebirth, people are willing to invest resources."

John Burse, a senior associate architect with Mackey Mitchell Associates and board president of the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group, fell in love with the neighborhood several years ago. He has spent the past five years restoring his own house. He paid \$7,000 for

the 3,500-square-foot house, which had been vacant for years and had no electricity.

Redeveloping the area will help the residents realize their own vision, Burse said.

"They knew the assets: the architecture, the economic and social diversity, the great location in the shadow of downtown, the great view of the Arch," he said.

The project combines renovated homes and rental property with new homes. The developers want to try to keep people in the neighborhood who have stuck it out through tough times.

"We've tried to pay our respect to people who've stayed here," Burse said. "At the end of the day, we don't want to lose them."

The restoration group got 10 home repair grants from the Catholic Commission on Housing and the city's Affordable Housing Commission. The 32 units of rental housing in the development will include some for low- to moderate-income families.

Across from the new homes, on North Market at 14th Street, an old storefront is being turned into eight rental units. And more than 2,000 square feet of street-level space will be available for community activities.

Architect Ralph Wafer has designed the new houses to fit with the architecture of the neighborhood, which is on the National Register of Historic Places. The builder is Charles F. Vatterott.

The units have brick facades, detailed cornices and cast stone sills and foundations. All have three bedrooms and range in size from 1,350 to 1,980 square feet. The base price for the smallest is \$145,900; it's \$182,900 for the largest.

A year ago, St. Louis Magazine listed Old North St. Louis as one of the city's best places to live, calling it one of the city's "truly up-and-coming-back neighborhoods."

Smith doesn't doubt it. "The story of this neighborhood is still being written," she said. "I want to stay around for the next chapter."