

Memorial Homes groundbreaking marks start of 12-month phase

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For those gathered at a pile of rubble at the 1600 block of Memorial Avenue, it was hard to believe that 40 apartments would be constructed at the former Brodart warehouse in about a year's time.

"It resembles a bombed-out European site," said John Grado, city community development director at the groundbreaking Thursday of Memorial Homes, a 40-unit apartment complex that will have a second phase as 32 townhouses and two single-family dwellings.

"We're not ready to dig footers yet," Grado said to a gathering of dignitaries and people responsible for reaching this point of the project at 1609 Memorial Avenue. "We didn't want to hold this event during the holiday season."

Behind Grado stood an 84-foot stack, but the remainder of the site, about a city block long, consisted of piles of brick and building parts.

"It's a step in the right direction," said Marvin Staiman, president of the Williamsport Planning Commission, who added, "They're taking a building that was unoccupied and making something good of it."

The mounds of building filler, once given a clean bill of environmental health, will be turned over to Gary Silversmith of P&L Investments, a Washington, D.C.-based developer who transforms old industrial sites into reusable parcels for housing purposes.

Grado said the project's evolution dates back to 2007, and is an example of the combination of removing a blighted and abandoned building merged with a city in the middle of the Marcellus Shale industrial boom.

"The Marcellus Shale created a new problem, a need for new housing," said F. Edward Geiger III, director of the Center for Community Financing at the state Department of Community and Economic Development.

"We are beginning a new rebirth of a neighborhood," said Mayor Gabriel J. Campana. Among the improvements will be lights and street level enhancements for the immediate neighborhood, he said.

For Rick Dill, vice president and chief financial officers of Brodart Co., the groundbreaking and start of the apartment construction was "bitter and sweet."

"My office was on the third floor," he said. Even then, the building constructed in 1892 showed its age, he said, citing an example of the uneven floor's effect on his office chair.

Most of all, he added, the \$10 million housing project, using natural gas impact fees, community development fund and private investment money is going to "give back to the neighborhood."

Builder P. Christopher Dirr, vice president of development for the NRP Group of Cleveland, Ohio, said the firm is active in 13 states.

"Rarely have we seen this kind of cooperation and commitment," he said.