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Home (/) > Today's Top Stories (https://Rbj.Net/Category/Todays-Top-Stories/) > Rochester's Center City Courtyard: From parking lot to 5-story affordable housing



Center City Courtyard rendering shows the completed project. (Rendering provided by CSD Housing, LLC)

# Rochester's Center City Courtyard: From parking lot to 5-story affordable housing

Kevin Oklobzija (https://rbj.net/author/koklobzija/) // May 9, 2024 5 Minute Read

When two barely used surface parking lots in downtown Rochester went up for sale a few years back, the folks at CSD Housing, LLC didn't see a gravel wasteland, well-worn fences and weeds. They instead saw a launching pad for aspirations, a place where lives could be rebuilt and transformation would be fostered. In about a year, that vision will become reality when construction on Center City Courtyard – a \$70 million project – is completed.

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The five-story building will be home to 164 apartments classified as affordable for residents earning at or below 80 percent of the Area Median Income. There will be 95 units reserved for persons experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness, with Eagle Star Housing, Helio Health and the Urban League of Rochester providing on-site support services.

McClary

"This project will be truly transformative, and I know that is said a lot in our industry, but we're taking a surface parking lot and building a five-story building with 164 units of affordable housing," said Whitney McClary, development director for CDS Housing.



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ON SPORTS Scott Pitoniak



Center City Courtyard is located on a plot bordered by West Main Street, Plymouth Avenue, Broad Street and South Washington Street.



"I grew up in Corn Hill and live in Corn Hill and it's great to be able to give back to my community," McClary said. "To see a parking lot go to a five-story building is very cool."

He believed that could be the case three years ago, too, when CSD Housing bought the property from [Spoleta Construction](#) & Development.

"The previous owner thought there could be a better use and we had some ideas," McClary said.

They would need cooperation and partners, however, so McClary immediately began pitching the idea to city leaders.

"I said, 'We're thinking about buying this parking lot, what do think?' " he said.

He inquired more than once, too, wanting to be sure the mayor's office was on board with the vision.

"Whitney was relentless," Mayor Malik Evans said earlier this week at a celebratory groundbreaking, seven months after general contractor Christa Construction began work on the site. "I don't know if I was even sworn in yet and he was saying, 'I want to talk to you about this project.' "

The city didn't really need convincing, though. Evans and others in city leadership understand the need not just for affordable apartments but supportive services for previously incarcerated residents and persons with mental health or substance abuse challenges.

"This is not just about housing, it's about hope and a promise for a brighter future for every resident of Rochester," Evans said.

Center City Courtyard is the state's largest supportive housing project outside of New York City, according to Dana Greenberg, director of New York State's Office of Temporary & Disability Assistance.

"We love the mission and it's really neat to be able to transform a neighborhood and provide housing that people can afford," McClary said.

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CSD has a variety of projects throughout the state, from the Bronx and Brooklyn to Binghamton and Herkimer. In Rochester, the firm has developed 270 on East and Clifford Avenue Apartments and will start on True North Apartments in the fall, a joint venture with DePaul.

"CSD is becoming a rock star in the supportive housing space," said Leonard Skrill, assistant commissioner of New York State's Homes and Community Renewal.

The property itself for Center City Courtyard would present challenges. It was a parking lot for a reason. In beginning site preparation, construction crews found eight underground storage tanks.

"It seemed like every day we found another storage tank," McClary said.

Because the building will essentially go right to the property line, contractors also needed to construct sheet piles to serve as the foundation.

CSD Housing brought in the design team from Passero Associates to create the building, and other local firms provided assistance with other aspects of the project.

[LaBella Associates](#) served as environmental consultants, Foundation Design, P.C., provided geotechnical engineering expertise and [Barclay Damon LLP](#) handled closing on the property.

Since the property sits alongside the former path of the Erie Canal, the architects looked at historical pictures as well as European cities with a robust canal system – Amsterdam in particular – when formulating designs.

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"The colors, the fabric and the scale of the buildings pay homage to that," said Steve Trobe, senior project architect at Passero.

CSD Housing joined forces with a host of groups to make the project possible, including development partner HELPDevCo, a New York City-based 501c3 nonprofit.

The state provided a \$25 subsidy through Homes and Community Renewal, along with \$3 million in permanent tax-exempt bonds. The Richman Group was the facilitator for \$30.5 million in Federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits and the city awarded \$1 million in HOME funding.

Because the building will be all-electric and feature a rooftop solar array as well as heat pumps, another \$902,000 will come from the state's Clean Energy Initiative.

When Center City Courtyard is completed, CSD will still have more work to do in the area. They also own the parking lot to the east across Plymouth Avenue.

McClary said they are envisioning a building that features commercial space on the ground floor – ideally anchored by a grocery store – with housing above, as well as for-sale townhomes.

"Anyone that has ideas, anyone that owns a grocery store, reach out," McClary said.

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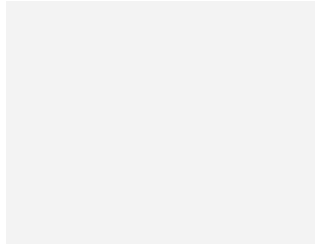


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