

Housing: Change in New Canaan

By ROBERT E. TOMASSON

NEW CANAAN

EXCEPT for the landscaping and interior work that will be completed over the next few weeks, the rows of garden apartments on a hill off Route 123 in this rurally elegant town are almost finished. In about two months, the first tenants are to move into the 60 one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments that are contained in zigzag groupings of 10 two-story structures with stained-cedar siding, surrounded by trees and overlooking a lake in back.

Apartment construction of any type is unusual in this town of single-family homes. And construction of subsidized low- and moderate-income housing, like the structures on the hill, has never before been undertaken here.

For New Canaan, ranked by the state as the wealthiest of Connecticut's 169 municipalities, the construction marks the end of a transitional period of more than seven years. During that time the town has, in its own way, come to terms with the pressing social and economic issue of permitting low-income housing.

Aside from the symbolic importance of the 60 units, which will have not many more than 100 occupants in a town population of almost 20,000, the apartments have major significance for New Canaan.

While the project, Canaan Parish, involved a radical departure in housing patterns, the town has resisted outside pressures and maintained virtually total control over that change. Whatever housing changes lie ahead, and few seem to think that they will be anything but slight, the town has shown that it can manage that change in keeping with its own image.

"We like to call it quality control," said Robert L. Bliss, president of the project's sponsoring corporation, New Canaan Neighborhoods.

The housing change did not come easily to the town. While Mr. Bliss noted that there was never "organized opposition" to a low-income project, the town had spent \$162,704 in legal fees to fight a lawsuit that sought to compel such construction by attacking what those who brought the suit characterized as the town's exclusionary zoning laws.

"In a bitterly racist region, where no provisions are made for low-income families, construction of 60 units is a step forward from nothing, but still far short of the needs," said Paul Davidoff, formerly the town planner for New Canaan and now executive director of the Suburban Action Institute in New York City, a nonprofit group that is active in attacking suburban zoning practices.

In 1970, several years after Mr. Davidoff left New Canaan, the institute filed the suit, which was dismissed in Federal Court in 1977.

In the classical political maneuver of controlling those forces that cannot be blocked rather than maintaining an inflexible opposition, local officials have kept essential control of the housing while meeting Federal and state guidelines on publicly financed housing.

"There have been some in town who wanted us to build the units without Federal aid, so that we could retain complete control and still have low-income housing," said Mr. Bliss in an interview in his New Canaan office. "But that was until I explained the ongoing obligation of the subsidy," he added with a laugh.

Construction cost was \$1,984,315, which was supplied in full by the state's Housing Finance Authority through a 40-year mortgage with an interest rate of 8.5 percent. The authority is a self-sustaining state mortgage-lending agency that receives its funds from the sale of tax-exempt bonds.

The six-acre Canaan Parish site is owned by the town, which charges New Canaan Neighborhoods \$1 a year. The sponsor, in turn, is to pay New Canaan \$36,000 a year in taxes.

The state mortgage and the town taxes will be paid from rents, which will come partly from the tenants and from the so-called Section 8 Federal rent subsidies that go directly to the sponsor.

Given the cost of the project, rents for the one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments have been set at \$399, \$459 and \$515 a month. The partial rents paid by the tenants will be based on a formula amounting to 25 percent of their adjusted monthly income.

Each year the Government will pay \$321,456 of the rent burden of the 60 apartments for a total of \$12,858,240 over 40 years.

Among eligibility requirements are maximum income levels ranging from \$14,200 a year for a single person up to \$22,850 for a family of six. Occupancy is limited to two persons to a bedroom.

After filling out an application listing all income and other personal data, and with credit and other checks being made where necessary, applicants are interviewed twice, including once in their present home.

Tenants will be carefully screened both as to their economic and racial grouping as well as general suitability. At least 18 of the families must be low-income, and probably re-

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New Canaan Accepts a Change

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ceiving welfare. Forty tenants will be white, 15 black and five Hispanic.

During two days last month when applications were first made available, 506 persons obtained information, and 231 of them submitted formal applications for apartments. Most, 81, were from New Canaan; 76 from Norwalk; 44 from Stamford; Bridgeport, 5; Ridgefield, 4; Darien, 2; 10 from other Connecticut areas and 9 from out of state.

There is no residency requirement for acceptance, although families within the area are granted higher priority among the many variables considered by the sponsoring organization.

Some of the applicants already live in public housing elsewhere and the tendency is not to give those families high priority. "We are looking more for families who have a strong need for new housing rather than those seeking just better housing," said Mr. Bliss.

During the first year of occupancy, the sponsor will monitor one factor especially closely: electricity use. Utilities are included in the rent, and officials are concerned that there may

be excessive use of electricity since tenants are not directly billed.

As he sat in his office across from the railroad station and discussed the meaning of Canaan Parish — the original name of New Canaan — Mr. Bliss was not given to extravagant statements about the significance of the housing.

"The idea has been around for a long time," he said. "There are good people here who just needed some leadership in getting it moving."

Mr. Bliss, 72 years old and a town resident since 1946, is a recognized master in two fields that embodied the qualities needed to bring a radical change to New Canaan, say town officials.

A State Senator from 1963 to 1967, Mr. Bliss has held a hatful of top Republican posts in the town and state. Now the head of his own public relations firm, Bliss & Smith, he seemed the ideal political public relations man to calm with one hand while bringing change with the other.

"He has been the focal point throughout," said First Selectman Henry S. Noble, who had headed the sponsoring group himself before he became the town's chief executive.

"With a great test of patience, he was able to convince both the [Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development] people and the Connecticut Housing and Finance Authority that a local nonprofit group could sponsor the project," said Mr. Noble. "Usually it's a developer looking to use Federal funds."

The First Selectman stressed, as Mr. Bliss had, the importance of the project's remaining in local hands "although the development money came in from outside."

Before the end of the year, a group of lawyers in Norwalk, working under a Federal grant, are to decide on a possible broad-scale legal attack on zoning practices within Fairfield County. By then New Canaan, unlike some nearby towns, will have some low-income housing and presumably be less of a potential target in any lawsuit.

"I think if New Canaan can acquire some new service people and perhaps some of the people find a way to improve their lot, then we've accomplished something of benefit for the town and the tenants," said Mr. Bliss. ■



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Robert L. Bliss, president of New Canaan Neighborhoods, at Canaan Parish project

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