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Business

One-man crew builds up South Side neighborhood

BY CHARLES O'TOOLE

Medill News Service

For a man who makes his living building condominiums, Benjamin Van Horne has a truly humble home: a trailer on a vacant lot in the Woodlawn neighborhood on Chicago's South Side.

"That's real affordable housing in Chicago," he jokes. "No rent; I pay maybe \$300 a month for running water and to have the sewage pumped out."

Van Horne is president, CEO, and everything else for Greenline Development Inc., a company focused on building high-quality affordable housing in Woodlawn.

The trailer is a temporary arrangement, adopted a few years ago under the financial strain of his first development and a concurrent divorce.

But the 31-year-old Washington, D.C., native says he intends to stay in Woodlawn as a developer and as a resident. He has set aside a unit for himself in one of his projects on the 6600 block of

South Maryland Avenue.

One of his customers, Linda Tinsley, is delighted with her Greenline unit. An employee at a major downtown law firm, Tinsley bought in a project on South Kimbark Avenue in May. She says the quality of construction made the difference.

"My inspector was a very picky person," she said, "but he told me he was impressed."

Van Horne's personal commitment is unusual, especially in a neighborhood still trying to turn the corner from poverty and crime to stability and prosperity.

For him, though, it's just a way to balance two seemingly incompatible impulses: to help build healthy communities while earning a healthy paycheck.

Developing affordable housing "was a way that I could potentially make money, but still do something that was socially responsible and a positive force," he says.

After a few years, the money is starting to appear.

Van Horne says the company

netted \$90,000 in 2005, mostly on sales of land. For this year he estimates profits of at least \$213,000, mostly from housing sales.

Greenline has finished three condo projects comprising 26 units in Woodlawn. Including the South Maryland project, three more are under construction with another nine in the pipeline, according to Van Horne.

Several of the projects were helped by Chicago's "City Lots for City Living" program, which sells city-owned vacant lots to developers for as little as \$1. In return, the developer pledges to reserve units built on the land for home buyers earning no more than 120 percent of the city's median income, or \$90,500 for a family of four.

His prices range from \$179,000 for a two-bedroom condo to \$429,900 for custom-built single-family houses.

Van Horne acknowledges that the units' prices are steep for many Woodlawn families, but says he hopes they will attract



CHARLES O'TOOLE/MEDILL NEWS SERVICE

Developer Benjamin Van Horne, 31, of Greenline Development Inc., stands outside the trailer in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood where he is living while working on affordable housing projects.

police, firefighters and other middle-class home buyers priced out of hotter areas.

That's in line with 5th Ward Alderman Leslie Hairston's vision for the neighborhood.

"We're trying to attract mixed income development," she said.

"It fills in vacant lots with new quality housing. It takes away from blight."

The signs of that effort are visible in Woodlawn, most clearly in the new housing sprouting

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Builder: Woodlawn increases economic diversity

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north of Oakwood Cemetery.

But there remain persistent challenges.

As of October, the police district covering Woodlawn reported 32 homicides in 2006, tied for the city's third-highest district total. Vacant lots are common. Some developments have stalled or been abandoned before completion. There is a lack of good grocery stores.

Van Horne says other area developers are working on attracting a supermarket, something he says is key to revitalizing the area.

A white man who grew up in a mixed-income, majority-black D.C. neighborhood and attended majority-black schools, Van Horne speaks with quiet intensity about the need for integrated neighborhoods.

"Usually when people hear 'integration,' they just think racially," he says, but he is equally interested in the diversity of social backgrounds,

income and ages that he says help make a strong community.

He started Greenline while temping at a consulting firm, and almost from the beginning planned to renovate an old apartment complex.

"It was probably a little crazy," he admits.

He looked at buildings, focusing on abandoned properties saddled with back taxes.

He eventually found one on South Maryland that had been seized by the city because of unpaid taxes. Using credit cards, he put down a \$35,000 deposit, letting him claim ownership if the original owner did not come forward. The owner never showed, and Van Horne had his first project.

But the project proved more complicated than he had anticipated.

"There's a huge market for lower-cost rentals, but it's very hard to meet that market," he says. "Without government subsidies, you can't gut-rehab a building and rent at affordable

prices and make ends meet."

Public agencies and charities were reluctant to take a risk on a first-time developer, so Van Horne decided instead to convert the property to condominiums. Construction was soon under way on what would become "The Baltimore."

That project made a strong impression on Hairston.

"Benjamin took a dilapidated, abandoned building and turned it into beautiful condos," she said. "Where other developers wouldn't touch it, he stayed the course."

Andre Blacknard, a partner in the small Chicago building firm MPI Construction Inc., has overseen construction on several Greenline developments. He says Van Horne's dedication to high-quality materials sets him apart from other affordable-housing developers.

"Usually we do something like this on the North Side," Blacknard says. "Ben's really a visionary in terms of what he

wants to do."

Van Horne acknowledges that being a white developer in a predominately black neighborhood creates the need to build trust. "Every new block I move into, it's about overcoming the skepticism of the neighbors about what I'm doing."

He says homeowners are generally welcoming of the new developments, especially when they replace vacant lots or abandoned buildings.

Still, he knows that development is a double-edged sword.

"It's an imperfect process," he says, "and it may mean — it probably will mean — many people renting in Woodlawn will lose their apartments."

His hope is that the new vitality brought by condos and new residents will improve more lives than it will displace.

Maybe, he says, Woodlawn "can become and remain an integrated neighborhood — economically, generationally, socially, as well as racially."