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Moorestown Carries Its Own Burden in Housing Plan

By JOE SHARKEY
Special to The Inquirer

MOORESTOWN — On Maple st., where the homes are big and well-kept and set back gracefully on landscaped lawns, a boy was seen riding an antiquated unicycle on the sidewalk the other day.

It says something about the nature of this old town, which grew up around a Quaker Meeting House, and still maintains its individuality in the pool of South Jersey suburbia that laps at it on all sides, that no one paid very much attention to the boy on the odd-looking bike.

But just a few blocks away on Beech st., a rutted loop of road whose homes are decrepit and sometimes lean against each other as if for moral support, a rat skittered out of a basement and across the pot-holed street.

It says something further about the nature of Moorestown that many civic leaders are so concerned about this slash of urban blight in the midst of the town's 15 square miles of placid gentility that they are willing to mount a private fund-raising drive to put a low-income apartment project on Beech st.

Study in Contrast
Therein lies the contradiction:

Moorestown, despite its solid Quaker traditions, is the kind of place that traditionally resists attempts to build low-income housing within its manured borders. Indeed, Moorestown's strict zoning code has made it a target of criticism about the lack of low-income housing in the suburbs.

Despite that, a local group of businessmen — supported by the town's churches — have been trying for nearly five years to build an 18-unit, rent-subsidized apartment complex on Beech st. And a civic eyesore would be expected to raise \$200,000 from local residents to do it.

The nonprofit group is 10 single homes and 19 row-called MEND (Moorestown Neighborhood Ecumenical



Two men load a car on Beech st., a rundown section of affluent Moorestown

Development). Its plan, begun in 1969, is to sponsor and manage an 18-unit low-income project on Beech st.

The idea, they say, is to afford residents of some of the 39 existing homes on the street a chance to live in better housing.

In the process, they feel, Beech st. would be upgraded, and a civic eyesore would be eliminated.

The people who live in the neighborhood block. Many of them are old — long-time residents who worked as domestics for Moorestown's rich and now live on fixed incomes.

About half of them own their homes. The others pay from \$60 to \$100 monthly rent to absentee landlords. Not all of them were overwhelmed when the white businessmen came down the block with promises of a new apartment building.

"At first, we couldn't elicit significant support from Beech st. residents," said Boyce Adams, a local busi-

nessman and the president of MEND. "It was difficult to convince them that we were not being condescending. A lot of them were suspicious," he said. Many of them still are, he conceded.

The project has not had smooth sailing since it was first proposed nearly five years ago. When the town's 10 churches first joined to

hit a bureaucratic snag. The problem at that stage, Adams said, was to obtain a "resolution of need" from the town government and then to get a tax abatement provision. In most suburban towns, the project would have died right there.

But Moorestown approved both, and the project appeared to be gaining momentum. It was awaiting an on-site inspection from HUD when President Nixon last Jan. 3 froze all federal funds for such subsidy housing programs.

"That put the whole kabosh right back on us," said Adams. Still optimistic, the MEND leadership decided to build their apartment complex with private contributions.

A fund-drive started in February. With luck, said Adams, the \$200,000 that is needed to complete financing can be raised by the end of May. Churches and private businesses have joined in the solicitations.

"We're not out to build low-income housing all over Moorestown," Adams added hastily. "I don't believe in low-income housing per se, because I think it's discriminatory. But it's got to be good for Moorestown when we can help 18 families get a better shelter over their heads, to live decently instead of indelicately."

Warren Sawyer, another MEND official, estimates that "90 percent of the people" on the street support the project.

"We definitely feel the need for this to succeed," said Sue Heath, who belongs to the local League of Women Voters.

But on Beech st., where life goes on much the same as it has, vocal excitement over MEND's renewal project is hard to find.

If the project is built, one man said, all that will happen is that families who move

from rundown houses into new apartments will be replaced in the rundown houses by others.

And the old people, he said, can't afford to pay the higher rents the new apartments would require unless they get financial assistance.

But Adams said that these problems can be worked out.

once the apartments are built. "Construction would mean the relocation of only one family on the street," he pointed out.

"What we're doing is not to try to perpetuate Beech st.," he said. "We originally had planned to develop the entire (Beech st.) area. Now, we'll be happy just to get the project built."

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