

Affordable Housing Smart-Growth Solutions

Affordable housing component plus creative collaboration brings mixed-use site to life along Arlington's Metro corridor

Successful smart-growth development requires creativity in dense metropolitan areas. In Arlington, VA, it took an innovative land swap, a dynamic affordable housing component, and a strong public commitment to transit-oriented development to bring a five-acre, mixed-use site to life.

Thanks to a creative collaboration between a prominent development firm and AHC Inc., a longtime affordable housing developer, 90 units of affordable housing are rising in Ballston, one of Arlington's most sought-after neighborhoods, along with high-end townhouses and 450,000 square feet of office and retail space.

After the large-scale commercial project stalled, the affordable housing component served as a catalyst for the project – providing the family-friendly addition the neighborhood wanted. “The affordable housing piece actually moved the site development plans forward, while resolving the community's concerns created by the initial proposal,” explained John Welsh, AHC's Director of Multifamily Development.

The collaboration also demonstrates effective smart growth development. Conveniently located near Metro and bus lines, grocery stores and schools, The Jordan will provide high-quality housing for 90 low- and moderate-income families. The building is designed to complement its commercial neighbors.

Getting the pieces together isn't simple, given that land near urban centers and mass transportation can be scarce and expensive. But with The Jordan, AHC made it all work, even securing additional units on the site – proving that affordable housing can enhance the quality and vibrancy of a mixed-use, smart growth development, benefiting everyone involved.



Overcoming challenges

The unusual collaboration that resulted in The Jordan began when private developer The JBG Companies set its sights on redeveloping the former Bob Peck Chevrolet site in Ballston. But AHC, which owned property next door to the site, had concerns about the firm's proposed development, as did the neighborhood. AHC objected because the JBG plan would have limited AHC's development options on its adjacent property.

A situation that could have ended up with a disappointing impasse was transformed into a successful project instead, after a housing advocate came up with the novel concept of a land swap.

AHC would build its new affordable rental building where JBG's townhouses were to be, and JBG would construct its townhouses where AHC's older apartment building stood. The swap pleased the neighborhood, because it helped smooth the transition from the high-rise commercial buildings to the residential community. The new plan also stepped down the project's density from the commercial buildings in the center of the project, to the four-story affordable apartment community, to the townhouses next to the existing single-family homes.

The land swap wasn't the only unique feature. JBG and AHC worked hand-in-hand on the construction of a shared garage for the site. Each side uses it, but with separate sections and entrances.

Dean Cinkala, Partner at JBG, said the involvement of an experienced affordable housing group was a key factor in the project's success. "With AHC," Cinkala said, "there are ways for affordable housing to work."

"There were four winners," AHC's Welsh explained. "JBG got their project approved, with two office buildings and the townhouses, and you could argue they even got a better site for their townhouses, because they were adjacent to single-family homes rather than office buildings. AHC won, because we got both neighborhood and county support for 90 new affordable homes. Arlington County benefited from the economic development -- one new sparkling office building, plus a building for Virginia Tech Foundation to expand its technology/scientific collaborations. Lastly, the neighborhood got more community benefits in the form of new affordable housing in a block with offices and townhouses."



Smart growth affordable housing can require creativity

The Jordan isn't the only project AHC has undertaken or has in the works along Arlington's Metro corridor. The Frederick, for example, a nine story building with 108 affordable housing apartments, is next door to a market-rate condominium building, the Park at Courthouse, which was built by AHC and Bush Construction Co. – all within a quarter mile from the Courthouse Metro stop. Sale of the condos helped to pay for the affordable housing building next door.

Andrew Viola, vice president of Arlington's Bush Construction Corp., a private developer and one of the partners on The Frederick, said the project shows how including affordable housing in a smart growth strategy makes economic sense as well. "We need affordable housing in this community," Viola said. "We need a way to keep bank tellers, and nurses, and secretarial folks in this county, spending their dollars here, instead of spending them out in Manassas."

With projects like The Frederick and The Jordan, AHC is demonstrating that innovative smart growth can be inclusive and effective. Affordable housing doesn't have to be a barrier to mixed-use development projects located on enviable sites near mass transit. Using a little creativity, like a land swap idea, AHC can help the transit-oriented growth movement get even smarter.

About AHC Inc.

AHC Inc. is a nonprofit developer of affordable housing based in Arlington, VA. Founded in 1975, AHC has developed 38 properties with 4,486 units in the mid-Atlantic region. AHC also provides homeownership services and onsite educational services to improve the quality of residents' lives. For more information, visit www.ahcinc.org.