

Condo idea worries low-paid workers

Highwood complex only option for many

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chicago/chi-0510060248oct06,1,2131577.story>

October 6, 2005

by Lisa Black

A Highwood apartment complex that houses many of the area's low-paid workers could be converted into pricey condos, raising fear among residents and alarming advocates for affordable housing.

As many as 2,000 people live at North Shore Estates on Sheridan Road, not far from million-dollar homes in newly developed Ft. Sheridan. Many of the mostly Hispanic residents walk or bicycle to work as landscapers, busboys or other service workers in nearby Lake Forest and Highland Park.

Housing advocates say the complex, where a three-bedroom apartment rents for about \$1,300 a month, is one of the few remaining places for low-income families on the North Shore. Even then, many of the families share an apartment to be able to pay the rent. Rumors of a potential sale have circulated before, but this time residents and community advocates feel a sense of urgency after confirming that the owners have an offer--though it is still uncertain if the apartments will become condominiums.

"They're off the wall with anxiety," said Robert Wolf, executive director of Family Services of South Lake County.

The agency runs Nuestro Center, a family resource program located at the complex.

"The community is worried," said former tenant Deysi Acosta, who translated for Amelia Noyola, who has lived in the complex for 10 years. Noyola, 39, said she moved to Highwood from Mexico to join her sisters for a better life for her family. Noyola, who cleans houses, and her husband have two children, ages 14 and 9.

"She's happy here because the schools are close and her job is here," Acosta said.

Owned by 88 investors, North Shore Estates is managed by Inland Real Estate Corp., an Oakbrook-based firm that confirmed it has an oral agreement to sell to a developer.

"We have an agreement with one of the potential buyers who has made an offer but no contract," said Inland spokesman Darryl Cater, adding that he doesn't know what the buyer wants to do with the property.

But Wolf said he learned that the plan calls for 150 condominiums selling for \$330,000 each.

While the buildings contain 249 units, an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 people live in the complex, officials said.

The conversion of the apartments into high-end condominiums would mean a significant change in city and school demographics in the community of 5,700 people, Highwood officials said.

The loss of the 182 elementary-school pupils who live at North Shore Estates would cut into the district's bilingual program and result in funding cuts, said Supt. Maureen Hager of North Shore School District 112.

The bigger concern, she said, is how to comfort children troubled about an uncertain future.

"Children say, 'I might not be able to come to school here anymore,' or 'We don't know where we're going to live,'" Hager said. "This is their world, and it's very upsetting to them."

But there's little the school district can do to influence the property owners, especially because the complex has not been sold, she said.

Affordable-housing advocates, school officials and social service representatives have organized several meetings to prepare for the possibility that the residents will need alternative housing. The next meeting is scheduled for 7:30 a.m. Tuesday at the District 112 administration building in Highland Park.

"We've been fighting these rumors [of a sale] for years," said City Administrator Marc Huber. "If and when it would happen, we would have to take a look at it."

Anthony Orum, a sociology professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said that while gentrification has happened gradually in Chicago neighborhoods, the turnover at North Shore Estates would be drastic.

Orum, who lives in Highland Park, has observed the community since it first housed Italian immigrants, then made way for Hispanic newcomers beginning in the 1980s.

"Once Ft. Sheridan was developed, I knew it would be difficult for those immigrants to live there," Orum said.

"I've heard negative comments made," he said. "But at the same time, my neighbors rely on many of these people to cut their grass, to do service jobs."

Meanwhile, the Mexican Consulate and the Illinois Coalition for Immigrants and Refugee Rights in Chicago have become involved as rumors of a sale swirl.

Recently, some residents kept their children home from school after hearing a rumor that federal immigration officers were rounding up and deporting tenants, officials said.

"We would like to know exactly what is happening in that place," said Rita Vargas, head of the Mexican Consulate's Office of Protection and Human Rights. She met with a group of tenants last week.

"Most of them are scared," she said. "Most of them don't want to talk to the consulate, even the toll-free number."

Gail Schechter, executive director of the Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs, suggested that nearby suburbs work together to maintain the apartments to meet the state's affordable-housing goals.

"A lot of people think North Shore Estates is already affordable housing--it's not," Schechter said. "It's market rate. A lot of people are subleasing, and that's why it's so crowded."

To make ends meet, Noyola's husband rides his bicycle six days a week to a job as a busboy at a Deerfield restaurant nearly 6 miles away, Noyola said. She walks to her house-cleaning jobs.

Five people share their three-bedroom apartment, paying about \$1,100 in monthly rent, plus utilities, she said. The family has looked at another apartment complex and a rental house but found nothing they could afford, she said.

Kimberly Laatz, the Nuestro Center supervisor, said Inland has been cooperative and has allowed the center to use two units for free. She hopes that between the city and the owners, a solution is forthcoming.

"Good people live here," Laatz said.