

NEWS

In 'forgotten' Sedamsville, two competing visions for West Side Cincinnati neighborhood

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An enclave of about 700 people on Cincinnati's West Side has become the focus of investors with wildly different visions for the neighborhood.

Sedamsville, where Pete Rose played baseball as a youth at Bold Face Park, has struggled for years, its buildings on a hill overlooking the Ohio River emptying out and decaying.

Now about two dozen houses and 15 vacant lots nestled in the hills just north of the park are being auctioned off in a court-ordered sale of foreclosed properties in receivership.

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The properties were previously owned by Sedamsville landlord, John Klosterman, who has a long history of Fair Housing Act violations, including sexually harassing female tenants.

Klosterman and his wife, Susan, declared bankruptcy in 2019. Their old properties are being sold to the highest cash bidder in the foreclosure sale that ends at 9 a.m. Monday.

Those making offers include a group led by the director of the prison ministry for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati and a home builder who grew up nearby in East Price Hill and graduated from Elder High School.

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Developer reinvesting in his old neighborhood

Kim Knoppe, founder of Columbus-based Autumnwood Homes, wants to help revitalize the area by rehabilitating the vacant and largely dilapidated properties he hopes to acquire in the foreclosure sale and reselling them at "affordable" prices with subsidies from the City of Cincinnati.

"I'm going to make a cash offer for all of the properties with no contingencies," said the 71-year-old real estate investor, who also plans to build more than two dozen single-family homes in East Price Hill's Incline District.

'Lift up the entire neighborhood': Local developer plans to build single-family homes throughout Incline District

Knoppe already owns a large swath of vacant land in Sedamsville on River Road, just west of the Waldvogel Viaduct, where he plans to build 40 luxury homes with rooftop terraces starting at about \$700,000.

Knoppe also owns dozens of other properties and vacant lots in Sedamsville, including an old brick home that was set to be demolished at 2462 River Road that he's renovating for sale at market rates.

Sedamsville has been neglected for too long

The record-setting former high school football and track star said he's taking the profits he made mostly selling houses in Columbus and reinvesting them in Sedamsville because the neighborhood has "gotten the short end of the stick for a long time."

"The neighborhood has been going downhill since the 60s," Knoppe said. "I look around at all the vacant lots and abandoned properties, and it reminds me of a 94-year-old man smiling and missing half his teeth.

"I still think the area has promise," he said, referring to the neighborhood of mostly low-income renters. "I have a vision, and I can make it work."

Clergyman wants to create monastery

Marty Arlinghaus, who heads the Cincinnati archdiocese's prison ministry, has a vision for Sedamsville, too.

But his vision is the polar opposite of selling high-end homes to well-heeled buyers.

Arlinghaus wants to provide housing and spiritual guidance for ex-offenders re-entering society through what he calls the Serenelli Project.

It's named after Alessandro Serenelli, an Italian man who repented after going to jail for the attempted rape and murder of 11-year-old Maria Goretti – one of the youngest canonized saints in the Roman Catholic Church.

Arlinghaus is hoping to acquire the abandoned Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church and the church's rectory in the foreclosure sale, as well as several nearby single-family homes to form a monastery-like complex of buildings.

The complex would provide housing, reentry services and employment for ex-offenders who volunteer to live like monks "so they can grow in the virtue that keeps them from reoffending and going back to prison," Arlinghaus said.

Former inmates would be required to work as apprentice tradesman, learning to remodel and renovate the buildings acquired for the Serenelli Project under the tutelage of professional contractors, Arlinghaus said.

The church, with its towering brick-red spire, and the rectory would serve as the operations center, providing a place for daily prayer, rehab, counseling and other services.

Don't call it a halfway house

"This isn't a halfway house because no operations or services would be offered in the same buildings where people are living," Arlinghaus said. The Serenelli Project has the support of the local archdiocese but is not sponsored by the archdiocese.

Instead, the project's operations would be funded with charitable donations and run mostly by volunteers, he said.

Arlinghaus said he was inspired to launch the Serenelli Project after a surprising encounter in one of the prisons where he works.

"One day, a guy at the Lebanon Correctional Institution asked me if a guy like him could become a priest," Arlinghaus recalled, noting the inmate was covered in tattoos. "The answer was theoretically yes, but practically speaking...I was thinking this is going to be such a big uphill battle for him.

"That's what inspired the idea" for the Serenelli Project, Arlinghaus said. "I thought we've got to create a community for him and others like him where they can have a full-on community life that supports them holistically."

Arlinghaus said his group has already purchased one house in the neighborhood near the church on Delhi Avenue in the open market. He hopes the house is just the beginning of what will one day be a full-time monastery with permanent residents.

Knoppe praised Arlinghaus' ambitions, but said there was no easy way to reconcile his plans with those of the clergyman.

Can monastery, housing development coexist?

"I'm not against it," Knoppe said, referring to the Serenelli Project. "But the buyers of the homes might be against it."

"Nobody wants a halfway house in their backyard," Knoppe said, adding that he thinks most people would view the Serenelli Project as such despite its true intent.

Cindy Bastin, vice president of the Sedamsville Civic Association, said her group is trying to remain impartial.

"We've been supporting Marty and his group for the past two years, even before the developer came into the picture," Bastin said. "But we're not going to rule in favor of either one. This is a community, and it should be open to everybody."

'We are definitely not a bunch of drunks.' Sedamsville Civic Association responds to developer

She said she was concerned that redeveloping the area might make it less affordable for current residents, either through rising rents or taxes. But she was happy to welcome any new development in the neighborhood.

"I'm glad that we are getting some interest from developers because it's been so long for Sedamsville," she said. "It's like we've been forgotten."