

Digging deeper into Sunnybrook Housing Development

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ALTON – A new housing development coming to Alton promises to bring jobs and a more willing – and even youthful – workforce to Alton, but is it everything being promised?

Called Sunnybrook Development, the proposed housing complex, which is set to be located at 767 Washington Ave., would contain as many as 40 units with one-bedroom, two-bedroom and even three-bedroom units. Dr. Ed Hightower, who is majority owner of EBJJ, LLC, one of the principal investors in the \$10 million project, said the development would attract more young families to Alton. He said the units, which are priced between \$700-\$1,100 a month rent-wise, would provide a great starting point to

young people and families looking for a safe place to start or grow their families, and even provide a good place to begin their quests for home ownership.

The location would be near bus stops as well as schools and parks. Hightower said the development with its affordable rent and amenities such as an on-site manager, playground, walking area and lawn irrigation, would be unique in Alton.

He expects people who are working at the Gateway Enterprise Area off Interstate 255 near Edwardsville would be able to commute to work via public transportation from the area. He also said the location would be perfect for students attending the SIUE Dental School – even if they have families.

Along with Hightower, the project is being managed by Morrissey Construction and the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA). Hightower said the development is being made possible through tax credits provided by the Illinois Housing Development Authority.

“The development will target entry level Madison County workforce aimed at attracting employees in local logistics such as those located in the Gateway Enterprise zone, Alton Regional Transportation Center, America’s Central Port (on the Mississippi River in Granite City), as well as workers earning between \$12 and \$20 an hour, who are looking for a safe and vibrant family community,” said Ed Hightower, majority owner.

“I am honored to partner with the Laborers Home Development Corporation (LHDC), an affiliate of the LIUNA, which supports over 400 families in Alton, and over 4,000 families in adjacent towns. LHDC has a proven track record of success in managing developments such as the Community of Sunnybrook. In addition, Mike and Ryan Morrissey, owners of Morrissey Construction Company, are one of the most respected and regarded families in the Alton/Godfrey area. They will bring professional expertise and stability to this project, and together, we will build a development that creates serenity and a sense of “community” among current and prospective Alton residents,” said Hightower.

During construction, which will begin with a spring 2019 ground-breaking and last about a year by current estimates, as many as 75 jobs will be created. After construction, Hightower said the Laborers will continue to manage the property by screening applicants and ensuring the development's high standards of appearance and safety are upheld.

“The laborers will be the on-site operators and will screen every applicant who wants to move into that place,” Hightower said. “They will be doing criminal background and credit checks to create strong standards and expectations for residents in that area.”

The future development is also located near the Alton Police Department, which Hightower said would add yet another level of safety in what he considers to be an already safe and well-rounded project.

Opponents of the development say Hightower's high hopes may be unfounded, however. Bruce Eglehoff and John Meehan operate a small business, which rents as many as 18 homes to people in Upper Alton. Eglehoff believes the development will become taxpayer-funded competition to their business, which rents homes within 2,500 feet of the future development, and charges rents varying from \$875-\$1,150 a month – right around the spectrum of prices Hightower proposed for Sunnybrook.

“Competition is what makes any area better,” Hightower said. “When people are forced to raise their standards and quality of life by giving them opportunities and options, it causes the quality of life to improve overall.”

Eglehoff said similar developments have been erected in Alton, such as Alton Acres, Hampton Homes and the development of Toledo Avenue with little success. Hightower said the new development would not be like others. He said only 11 financial aid vouchers exist for the 40-unit development, and the main goal of the place was to provide affordable housing to people seeking work in Alton who are young and may even have families.

“Toledo Avenue is a good comparison – that street behind Lowes behind Oakwood Estates – the government-owned property there and it had all the services it needed,” Eglehoff said. “They came in and built three two-bedroom and two three-bedroom units on concrete slabs. It was a \$1.1 million project that would hold a maximum of 24 people. Most Altonians would love to live in a house worth \$225,000 for a family of five. That's what this program looks like it will be.”

Hightower said as many as 11 funding vouchers will be available for the future development, but any applicants for those would be heavily screened before being considered for entry into the homes.

Another issue regarding the development was proposed by Meehan, who said he has the utmost respect for Dr. Hightower, adding he believed Hightower had the best of intentions and abilities with this development. As a landlord himself, however, Meehan said he was concerned about the future of the properties managed by Hightower – even with the promised screening.

“These things start out great, even with great intentions,” Meehan said. “I don't doubt Hightower's intentions. I even think the first group of people moving in will be fine. It's what happens after those first people move in that I'm worried about. After people move

in, some of them bring more people in. They have friends and family living with them who may cause more problems than the original group of people moving in. It's not a race thing, either. People of all backgrounds and races allow this to happen, and it brings up the crime rate.”

Both Meehan and Eglehoff said crime rates increase with housing developments such as the one Hightower is creating. Hightower said crime occurs everywhere, using the recent example of a man he described as “deranged” desecrating tombstones in Glen Carbon with swastikas in recent weeks.

“Even places like Edwardsville and Glen Carbon, which are supposed to be the safest places around here have stuff like that happen to them,” he said. “You cannot find anywhere that is absolutely safe from crime, but we will have a very good screening process and will also have an on-site manager. When people sign the lease to live there, they will acknowledge the rules we have in place about long-term visitors and guests as well as things like trash pickup and keeping the place looking nice and clean. When I was Superintendent of the Edwardsville School District, you can ask anyone who worked there, we had standards for upkeep. Those places we managed were always looking nice and clean with trimmed yards and no trash. I plan on upholding those standards with this development as well.”

While Eglehoff admitted he was concerned about the development at least in part because it is competition to his business, he posed the question to Dr. Hightower why this development was being constructed in Alton instead of near Hightower's own Edwardsville residence.

To that, Hightower said he was trying to revitalize Alton and bring new labor and youth to Alton who are looking for a nurturing and safe community to raise their families. He said that area was also underdeveloped where the future development will stand.

[More information on Sunnybrook can be found in a previous release on Riverbender.com, which can be found here.](#)

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