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Housing visionary draws a crowd in Brownsville

Bold plan for vast housing project could add gardens jobs, stores, more.

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TURNING HEADS: The Brownsville Partnership, founded by Rosanne Haggerty and led by Gerald Thomas (left), and Greg Jackson (right), is bringing together multiple agencies.

Four years ago, expecting her second child and behind in her bills, Rosalind Magwood found herself facing eviction from her apartment in a public housing complex in Brooklyn's Brownsville. Desperate to avoid ending up in a homeless shelter, she turned to the Brownsville Partnership, which quickly assigned her a case worker and a lawyer, and sent her to a financial literacy class. Today, the 40-year-old mother of four is paid up on all her bills, has a steady job and lives in a larger apartment in the same complex.

“The partnership has helped me a lot,” she said. “I am very grateful.”

Since launching in 2008, the initiative has grown to a staff of 18, has an annual budget of \$1.5 million and, more important, has assembled behind it a powerful alliance of public and private agencies to support residents in a neighborhood where nearly one in three families live below the poverty line. To date, the partnership has helped more than 400 Brownsville families hold on to their homes and more than 200 residents find a job.

Model of development

But as the partnership enters its fourth year, its bold proposal to transform one of the city's biggest public housing complexes, with 56 buildings, is turning heads across the city and is being hailed as a potential model of socioeconomic development with national applications. The plan aims not just to fix up the buildings and add new units. Also under early consideration are additional elements unheard-of in public housing. They range from retail stores to wind turbines, and greenhouses and gardens capable of yielding fresh produce. All these initiatives are focused on creating jobs and luring visitors.

“Brownsville is a neighborhood that was left behind,” said Rosanne Haggerty, who created the nonprofit behind the Brownsville Partnership, Community Solutions, an offshoot of Common Ground. She founded Common Ground in 1990 to help house the homeless, and today it boasts nearly 3,000 apartments. “It merits significant investment,” she added.

Aided by her track record—and a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant to show for it—Ms. Haggerty has persuaded a veritable who's who of organizations to help her. They include the deep-pocketed Robin Hood and Rockefeller foundations and even the venerable Municipal Art Society—a group long associated with such high-minded Manhattan projects as saving landmarks, including Grand Central. In a surprising turn, the society recently said it will make the Brownsville effort one of its top three priorities.

“Brownsville is a long-term commitment for us,” said Mary Rowe, vice president of strategy and partnerships at the society.

To date, Ms. Haggerty has united nearly a dozen nonprofits and city agencies with a two-barreled message. First, she argues that in an era of tight budgets, agencies must pool their resources to get the maximum bang for their buck. Second, she stresses that spending money up front to keep people out of shelters and jails actually yields a net savings for the city. It all makes good financial and social-policy sense.

Preliminary data show those efforts are already yielding dividends. In the past year and a half, the \$5 million the partnership has invested in Brownsville has resulted in an estimated savings of \$14 million for taxpayers. Keeping one family from being evicted and ending up in a shelter, for example, saves an average of about \$36,000 a year.

Urban visionary

DIVIDEND

\$14M SAVINGS generated by \$5M invested in the area so far

It was Ms. Haggerty's successes in working with the homeless in another tough neighborhood, Times Square, that first won her plaudits as an urban visionary. There, the Amherst College graduate converted the crumbling Times Square Hotel not just into housing for the homeless, but also a facility that features on-site job training and other services. In 1995, *Crain's* named her a 40 Under 40 Rising Star. Later, she repeated her initial success by converting the landmarked Prince George Hotel on East 28th Street.

“Rosanne has shown herself to be a highly creative and determined leader,” said Ingrid Gould Ellen, co-director of the NYU Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. “I am excited to see what she and her team can accomplish by applying this kind of comprehensive approach in Brownsville.”

Working with architect Alexander Gorlin, she has put together the preliminary outline of a master plan to reinvigorate four adjacent public housing complexes with a total of 4,100 units sprawled over 60 acres—more than six times the size of Washington Square Park—in Brownsville. Under consideration are the addition of retail space and rooftop gardens, the sprucing up of existing housing stock and the reconnection of streets to the city grid. Up to 1,000 housing units could be added either by building atop existing structures or erecting new buildings.

Remarkably, everything is to be done with minimal impact on residents.

“No one will be displaced, and buildings will not be demolished,” said Ms. Haggerty, adding that nothing has been finalized yet.

Her early plan draws on a number of sources, including a pair of hugely successful redevelopment projects in Toronto. In one, a derelict brick-making factory was redeveloped into a mixed-use facility with a farmers' market, restaurants, commercial tenants and event space at a cost of \$15 million.

Since it opened in late 2010, Toronto's Evergreen Brick Works has attracted more than 300,000 visitors and provided nearby residents with much-needed green space and fresh produce, as well as jobs, according to a spokesman for the project. It also includes two schools and a solar-power company among its tenants.

Ms. Haggerty hopes to eventually create a similar utopia in Brownsville. Whatever does come to fruition, she underscores that the goal is to create economic opportunities, and the Brownsville residents will be actively involved in planning for it.

“We don't just want to open a community center,” she said. “We want to make sure households don't get left behind.”

Forging ahead

The cost of Ms. Haggerty's Brownsville's revitalization plan has yet to be fleshed out, but she estimates that preliminary planning, resident surveys and environmental work over the next couple of years will alone cost \$1 million. Meanwhile, the partnership's work forges ahead.

“We are trying to create a safe community,” said Gerald Thomas, managing director of the Brownsville Partnership. “It's not about more police. It's about working on economic and social stability and giving residents more opportunities.”

To many, that sounds like a big step up from the neighborhood of today. Just four months ago, a young mother who resided in Brownsville's Tilden Houses was killed shielding several children from random gang-related gunfire across the street from a school. Last week, 43 members of rival gangs in Brownsville were charged with second-degree murder and first-degree conspiracy.

“We wanted to start in one of the hardest places,” said Ms. Haggerty. “Our strength is in working together and getting the best organizations to invest and make Brownsville more livable.”

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