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Englewood builds on trends

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BY KATHLEEN LYNN

STAFF WRITER

If you drive to or from the George Washington Bridge on Route 4, you can't miss the buildings - some finished and some under construction - that rise on either side of the highway a couple of miles from the bridge. It's Englewood South, one of the most visible new residential developments in North Jersey.

It's also an example of several major trends:

* Unlike the suburban, single-family homes built in the decades after World War II, Englewood South consists of condos and apartments, reflecting the density of new development in the area. About half of all new residential construction in the state is multifamily, according to Patrick O'Keefe, an analyst with the accounting firm J.H. Cohn in Roseland and former head of the New Jersey Builders Association. And much of this dense development is concentrated in Bergen, Hudson and Essex counties, he said.

* It's an infill project, built on already developed property - in this case, parts of an industrial park. Since New Jersey is already the most crowded state in the nation, its state and municipal governments generally want to preserve whatever open land is left. So builders are left to redevelop property in established cities and towns.

* It's a mixed-use, so-called smart growth project, which will ultimately include offices, a hotel, stores and restaurants along with housing, so residents won't need to get into a car every time they run an errand or want to eat out.

That last point is especially important to Peter Hekemian, vice president of the Paramus-based S. Hekemian Group, the project's lead developer.

"I think this stuff is exciting. My wife and I have lived in Portland, San Francisco and New York. We've always been able to walk to the coffee shop and the dry cleaner," said Hekemian, who is in his 30s. "That, I think, is immensely valuable to people, at least people my age."

In Portland, Ore., the couple worked and lived in an area called the Pearl district, a hip neighborhood reclaimed from an old warehouse district near downtown.

"That's where we realized there was value in creating a sense of place," Hekemian said.

The Englewood redevelopment has been almost a decade in the making. Englewood city officials declared the old industrial park there in need of redevelopment in 1999, but some of the business owners went to court to prevent condemnation of their properties. Ultimately,

the project was scaled back from 60 acres to 40 acres, and many of the factories and warehouses have stayed open.

The new neighborhood now includes two projects where Hekemian is the lead developer: the Brownstones, a completed 350-apartment development north of Route 4, and the Sheffield, a residential complex south of Route 4 that is under construction.

Jennifer Akkaway and her husband moved into their apartment in the Brownstones a little over a year ago, from Manhattan. They were drawn by the prospect of paying a lower rent for a larger apartment than they could find in New York, as well as the outdoor pool, grassy open courtyard and nearby gym. Being less than three miles to New York is also a plus.

But she said the complex is not yet the pedestrian-friendly neighborhood envisioned by the developer, because the Brownstone's storefronts haven't been leased.

"There really isn't anything within walking distance," Akkaway said. A coffee shop is scheduled to open soon, however, and Akkaway is looking forward to that.

In addition, the city plans to start a trolley service to bring residents of the Route 4 corridor to the shops and restaurants of downtown Englewood, about a mile away.

The Sheffield was originally planned as condos, but as the housing market softened, the units were repositioned as a combination of rentals and condos. The developers plan to add stores, offices and a hotel to the Sheffield.

Near the Sheffield, south of Route 4, is Windsor Park, a 181-condo complex on a long, narrow, 7-acre site overlooking the Overpeck County Golf Course. Finished in 2007 by Rushton Industries of Fairfield, Windsor Park is separated from the Sheffield by Overpeck Canal.

"It's a great commuter spot to get into the city," said Rick Rushton of Rushton Industries. And the stores that are scheduled to be added to the Sheffield will also add to the appeal of Windsor Park, he said.

Mayor Michael Wildes said the new development is not only more attractive than some of the older industrial buildings it replaced, it is also expected to bring in much more tax revenue once it is completely developed.

"We take great pride in having changed the landscape of Englewood," Wildes said.

Although the Brownstones and the Sheffield are modeled on city neighborhoods, they also provide parking. But in the Sheffield, the housing units wrap around and hide the parking decks; in the Brownstones, parking is below and behind the buildings.

"It's important to have parking, but you don't want to see it," Hekemian said. "It's not a pretty thing to look at."

The Brownstones and the Sheffield are aimed at a target market of young people and empty nesters, rather than families, because there are no three-bedroom units. The developers are heavily marketing the location, just minutes from the George Washington Bridge.

"A lot of people come out of the city," Hekemian said. Starting at about \$1,900 for a one-bedroom, the rents at the Brownstones look reasonable compared with New York, he said.

Condo prices at the Sheffield start in the \$300,000s. At nearby Windsor Park, most of the units have been sold, but several new two-bedroom, two-bath condos are available in the \$400,000s.

E-mail: lynn@northjersey.com

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