

Urban Infill Project Embraces Green Building Guidelines

Asheville, NC—Everybody's touting green building processes these days, but there's green and then, well, there's truly green, as per the stringent specifications of the NC HealthyBuilt Home certification program. This voluntary statewide program is an integral part of a new urban infill development taking shape now in north Asheville. Sunset Park—a 19-unit project built by local developers, architects, and construction workers with local funding—is combining green building with responsible community cooperation.

The roughly 3.5 acre Sunset Park, located on Baird Street which intersects Charlotte Street, will offer a mix of condos, townhomes, and single family homes. The old buildings will be torn down, and existing footprints will be used, so very little grading will be needed.

Dozens of lovely 50-70 year old trees are being carefully preserved, because, as developer Alan Laibson puts it, it's simply the right thing to do. Part of the preservation process includes installing steel sewer lines. Why? Steel is impervious to tree root encroachment and therefore requires much less tree removal and earth disturbance. The cost is much higher than using standard sewer materials.

“We felt compelled to honor this land, to do something that made sense for the neighborhood,” said Alan Laibson, who is part of Iris Investments Properties, the development company. “We live here, and we've seen too many things built that did not maintain the land. We intend to minimize any additional grading and will use existing building sites to create houses with small footprints, vertical rather than horizontal.”

Sunset Park is the culmination of the efforts of Suzy Laibson and Cynthia Kimmel. In 1998 with the purchase of a run down Arts & Craft bungalow in Kenilworth they systematically began buying, renovating, renting and ultimately selling properties in North, East and West Asheville. Ultimately their hard work laid the foundation and the funds for the purchase of, what they feel is a special piece of property in North Asheville that will become a showplace for a beautiful community, built harmoniously to exist side by side with current homes in the neighborhood and still be cognizant of how to be minimally invasive to the land. In addition, the homes will be built with an eye toward energy usage and the best materials to minimize on going maintenance and still be beautiful.

The NC HealthyBuilt Home program encompasses all aspects of environmental design and construction. Areas covered include site and landscape, materials, indoor air quality, heating and cooling systems, the building envelope, and water efficiency. Third party verification is required during the building process. An inspector signs off phase by phase.

Some examples of NC HealthyBuilt Home requirements that Sunset Park incorporates will include reclamation and retention of all storm water runoff. Native plants will occupy most of the property; these are plants adapted to the environment so they don't need as much water. Photovoltaic panels will convert the sun to electricity, powering

low-voltage landscape lighting. Radiant floor heat will be standard. Select homes will have the option of installing solar water panels to preheat water used for the radiant floor heating which will help lower homeowner's utility costs. Energy Star appliances and lighting are standard, as are double pane energy efficient windows.

Iris Investments Properties is embracing the NC HealthyBuilt Home program to assure that Sunset Park exists gracefully in the neighborhood. Learning from past experience, they approached the neighborhood association early on to get input and feedback. The developers listened and incorporated, wherever possible, their requests into the plan. The result? "The neighbors are pleased with what we're doing, and we got unanimous approval from City Counsel when it was presented to them," said Laibson.

Laibson explained that it only made sense to include the neighbors up front and to listen carefully to their concerns. Elizabethann Wyndetts is one of those neighbors. "Alan Laibson has been very forthcoming with the plans for the site, open with neighbors and doing what he said he was going to do," she said.

Robin Cape, Asheville City Counsel member, said that the project achieves higher density and has a nice communal feel to it. She also appreciates the green aspects, commenting that buildings account for 40 percent of the energy used in the world today. "Sunset Park also provides more housing closer to town, so fewer cars are needed. The variety of designs is good and they worked to fit it into the community," she commented. "And it's always nice to have people who live here build here."

The project is being developed by local people who have lived here for years. Funding is provided by Capital Bank. Joe Kimmel, local philanthropic and owner of Kimmel & Associates is among the group of investors. Kimmel is very excited to join this group of people dedicated to helping preserve the local beauty of this site. Kimmel says "this beautiful piece of property will have a village like setting and be environmentally conscious that will make our city proud. I love it." Preferred Properties, a local real estate firm, will handle sales of the units. David Wells, Wells/CM will build the homes.

Local architect Daryl Rantis designed the project; one of his designs was recently featured in Bungalow magazine. He noted that it's the first housing project in north Asheville where the landscape and architecture are working together using NC HealthyBuilt Homes and Energy Star requirements. "This is building that's uplifting to the human spirit," he said.

"In this classic urban infill project, we're taking land right in the middle of a community and converting it into an addition to the neighborhood," said Alan Laibson. "There won't be any gates, and the walking paths we're designing will be open to the neighbors. We just want it to fit in, to have it feel like it's been there a long time, and we're hoping a variety of people, from young families to empty nesters, will appreciate our efforts. This will be home to people who make a conscious choice—to buy here because it's green and because it exemplifies a quality of life they desire."