

Avenue CDC

# Eying a National Model for Sustainable Redevelopment

BY MARY LAWLER

With roots in historic preservation, **Avenue Community Development Corporation**, a 12-year-old NeighborWorks® organization working northwest of Houston's downtown, has added a special focus on environmental sustainability.

In fact, Avenue is working to create a comprehensive strategy for sustainable redevelopment of environmentally blighted inner-city neighborhoods. Avenue's goal is to create a national model, especially in hot, humid climates like those throughout

the Gulf Coast of the United States.

Avenue's environmental initiatives include reclaiming brownfields, "recycling" older homes, and promoting environmentally sound new construction techniques.

## Reclaiming Brownfields

In the past, Houston has maintained a "throwaway" attitude toward land. Properties have been developed, used, and then abandoned to become vacant lots and empty buildings. Sometimes, such sites are contaminated or perceived to be contaminated, complicating their reuse.

Redeveloping brownfields can restore vitality and economic growth to older neighborhoods, while relieving sprawl on the urban fringe. Potential reuses include business, light industry, and affordable housing. And more and more communities are restoring brownfields for use as community gardens, parks, and open space.

In 2000, with support from the Brownfields Program of the Houston Mayor's Office of Environmental Policy, Avenue successfully developed a 74-unit affordable housing complex, Washington Courtyards, on a former brownfield. As a leader in brownfield redevelopment, Avenue received the 2001 award from the Houston Mayor's Office of Brownfields Redevelopment.

Avenue currently is working to redevelop a second brownfield at the nearby Old Jefferson Davis Hospital into 34 affordable, loft-style apartments for very low-, low- and moderate-income households. So far, it has received \$200,000 in EPA funding, more than \$2 million in low income housing tax credits, and a \$100,000 capital grant from Neighborhood Reinvestment.

## Recycling Older Houses

Avenue has "recycled" 27 older homes, many

Developed on a former brownfield.

PHOTOS BY DVORSACK MIROSLAV





historically significant, under its “Move Home” and “HouseSave” programs. Under Move Home, donated homes are transported to the target area, rehabilitated, and sold to low- and moderate-income families.

In addition to preserving historic buildings and providing affordable homeownership opportunities, Move Home also improves Avenue’s target neighborhoods by cleaning up and redeveloping vacant lots – many of which had become overgrown by weeds and used for illegal dumping, posing environmental hazards.

In the “HouseSave” program, vacant, boarded-up houses located in the target area are purchased and rehabilitated for sale to low-income families or individuals. Many of the houses were in poor condition and posed a hazard to community residents.

#### New Construction

In 2002, Avenue CDC launched a pilot program to newly construct single-family homes for purchase by low-income homebuyers. The first four were completed in summer 2002, and 17 more are in various stages of development. This program uses environmentally-appropriate design and building materials, so the homes are energy-efficient and more cost-effective to maintain over the long-term.

Jolanda and Israel Catano are among the families who have benefited from Avenue’s program.

The couple had been searching for an affordable house in the neighborhood where they grew up, when Jolanda learned about a small subdivision Avenue was constructing just down the street from her sister. Jolanda contacted Avenue CDC, where she was put in touch with Maria Pineda, Avenue’s homebuyer counselor. Pineda worked with the couple throughout the home-purchase process, and



The Catanos at their new home.

today, they live happily with their two children, Demi and Ian, in a new three-bedroom developed by Avenue CDC.

“I don’t think I could ever have afforded such a beautiful home without Avenue CDC,” said Jolanda, “and Maria helped us every step of the way.” All of Avenue’s single-family development programs will benefit from a recent Neighborhood Reinvestment capital grant, which will provide a revolving property acquisition fund.

Avenue contributes significantly to making Houston an environment where people want to live, work and raise a family. ■

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