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Little Italy sees signs of turnaround

Homes, street improvements aid neighborhood

By Eileen Dallabrida

In its heyday, DiNardo's Restaurant drew patrons from four states, lured by steaming platters of Maryland blue crabs.

But since 1999, the Lincoln Street landmark had been empty, casting a dark pall on its neighbors in the city's Little Italy section.

This spring, the dilapidated restaurant was gutted and transformed into two townhouses. This summer, work will be completed on an additional five townhouses going up on the parking lot across the street.

The people who pay \$200,000-\$250,000 for homes at the Villas of Little Italy will become part of a neighborhood where residents can shop for Italian specialties at Papa's Market, buy fresh bread at Black Lab Bakery, eat lunch at Ristorante Mona Lisa and get a massage at Salon KOME & Day Spa.

Mayor James Baker says Little Italy is a shining example of a successful grassroots effort to solidify, and then improve a neighborhood.

"Union Street and Lincoln Street are true economic centers," he says. "It's all there, the restaurants, the retail, the residential and other small businesses."

Founded in 1996, the 300-member Little Italy Neighborhood Association has worked with government to install a distinctive arch on Lincoln Street proclaiming "Welcome to Little Italy." More than \$4 million in upgrades in streetscaping and lighting have been added.

The association also lobbied for a \$3 million beautification and security project for the Rodney Reservoir, built in 1863. Restaurateurs passed on reviving DiNardo's after the crab house closed because the building was riddled with asbestos and would require extensive remediation. The parking lot, once home to Zappterrini Bakery, was an eyesore defined by a chain-link fence.

"Without exaggeration, I can say we spoke to at least 15 different people and organizations over the years to try to develop the property," says Luigi Vitrone, president of the neighborhood association and owner of Pastabilities restaurant.

In subsequent years, the building was damaged by fire and was in poor structural condition when it was purchased last year by the Wilmington Housing Partnership. The nonprofit group paid \$335,000 for the parcel and an additional \$25,000 for asbestos removal, design and legal expenses.

As the project evolved, it became clear the development would not be in keeping with WHP's core mission of providing housing that costs no more than \$170,000, says Jerry Cain, executive director. So WHP decided to sell it.

The developer, Casale Construction LLC, bought the property for \$400,000 and began building three-bedroom, two-and-a-half bath town houses with such amenities as open floor plans, brick facades, central air conditioning, off-street parking and a cobblestone courtyard. Plans to build six homes on the vacant parking lot were batted back to five in order to make each residence larger and enhance the communal spaces.

Anthony Casale, who heads the company, has strong ties to the neighborhood. His mother and brothers live in Little Italy.

The first two townhouses already are sold, both to single professionals.

"We hope they will join us in our spring cleanups and plantings and the other things we do in this neighborhood," Vitrone says. "We hope they will shop and dine here."

The association also is pressing for the installation of security cameras in the business district, which would benefit both patrons and merchants. On a less formal basis, the group is considering establishing a committee to look in on elderly residents and provide them with help on simple chores.

"People here have been tenacious in their desire to create a good quality of life," Vitrone says. "It's bearing fruit."

