

Currents

Summer 2006

A publication of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation



BOLD GAMBIT

FOUNDATION'S WING LOOKS TO HISTORY
TO OFFER NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE FUTURE



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FOUNDATION'S WING LOOKS TO HISTORY TO OFFER NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE FUTURE

The Wilbur Marvin Foundation is tilting at windmills. That is being whispered about a foundation project aiming to set a higher standard for real estate developments in Baton Rouge. The foundation, a wing of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, plans to build a mixed-income, mixed-use community on 200 acres behind Bon Carré Business Center on Florida Boulevard.

A recent article in a business publication wondered if the project was “implausible” because it would mix incomes in a project and be located near a perceived high crime area. Say the skeptics: Why would someone buy a \$350,000 house in the neighborhood, now named Smiley Heights, to live next to the working poor?

Why not? counters Bardwell Development’s Scott Bardwell, who is working on the project with Commercial Properties Development Corporation, the real estate arm of the Wilbur Marvin Foundation. “If we don’t try it, it isn’t going to happen.”

Bardwell’s got evidence that Smiley Heights will succeed. In Pittsburgh, St. Louis and other cities, the project’s other partners—developer McCormack Baron Salazar and Maryland-based Torti Gallas—have built neighborhoods that blend houses at different

price points with retailers in a walkable community. In Pittsburgh, a development similar to Smiley Heights was so well received that residents wanted to buy housing even though the dwellings were only available for rent, says Bardwell.

Because it’s a traditional neighborhood development, Smiley Heights will also get a lift from the rising popularity of such mixed-use developments, which have moved from fad to mainstream in the past decade. About 500 TNDs have either been built or are now under construction across the U.S., reckons the New Urban News.

LOOKING BACK

Smiley Heights isn’t a new idea. Mixed-income neighborhoods were popular before the 1950s, when their pattern was overtaken by same-same communities with houses priced at like levels.

In Baton Rouge, there are still several thriving areas where people of different incomes live as neighbors. An example is the Garden District, a lush Mid City neighborhood in which college students rent apartments near people with \$1 million mansions. “That was good planning,” declares Bardwell.



Smiley Heights will replicate this pattern and use a powerful incentive to get residents to buy into the neighborhood. Bardwell, Camm Morton of Commercial Properties, and representatives of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation are talking to EBR school Superintendent Charlotte Placide about adding a new school in the heart of Smiley Heights. The school being discussed would teach kindergartners to eight-graders. In a nod to the past, Bardwell expects kids living in Smiley Heights to walk to the school.

The school will provide a shared value for the neighborhood, and shared values will be the reason people will want to live in the community, says Patrice McGinn, the lead Torti Gallas architect on the project. “It’s finding common threads that link people—whether it’s a community center that has some historic relevance, an urban park, or a school.” Education of children is not the only shared value for Smiley Heights. “Everyone wants a good education for their children, good housing, a safe neighborhood,” says Bardwell. “That transcends all demographics.”

Another shared value is the desire to live in a traditional neighborhood development, particularly one in which the people provided ideas in the design

process. Like for its other TNDs, Torti Gallas held town meetings to get buy-in from the surrounding neighborhoods and from people who are interested in living in Smiley Heights. “When people have the opportunity to become a part of the design process early on, there is a sense of pride and ownership that brings them together,” says McGinn. “All of a sudden, it doesn’t really matter who makes more money and who gets to live next to whom.”

continued

SMILEY HEIGHTS

Location: 200 acres off Ardenwood near Florida Boulevard. The land was donated to nonprofits by the late Paul Perkins.

Purpose: The goal is to build a mixed-income, mixed-use development anchored by a public school. It would break with modern patterns in Baton Rouge, where residents align along income and race lines.

Details: The project will include 800 to 1,200 housing units, depending on demand. Homes, apartments and senior living units will be blended, with some homes subsidized for low- to moderate-income households. Housing will cost from about \$128,000 to \$350,000.

IN THE DETAILS

The success of TNDs is in the details, from the narrow streets to the common areas for gathering. You can see this at River Ranch, a flourishing TND in Lafayette. It includes shotgun houses, row houses, apartments, work-live space, and mansions surrounding a common gathering area. Shops and a small grocer are the heart of the community, which can be crossed on foot in just 10 minutes. A hotel and more retailers are coming to River Ranch.

In Baton Rouge, Smiley Heights will follow Willow Grove as the second TND in town. What distinguishes Smiley Heights from Willow Grove and River Ranch is the goal of truly mixing people of all incomes in the neighborhood. Other TNDs have failed on this key measure of TND accomplishment because strong demand for housing in TNDs escalates prices beyond the means of low- and middle-income buyers. But Smiley Heights will be available to the working poor because part of the project will have government-subsidized housing, thanks to federal tax credits and other aid, says Bardwell. The subsidized housing, he says, will be for someone with a household income of less than \$48,000, such as a single mom with children.

That single mom and her kids will live in a great, modern neighborhood. Smiley Heights will have lakes, a canal transformed into a green waterway, walking trails, and a community center. A neighborhood retail center will be on Ardenwood. Housing will include a 120-unit senior apartment facility. The project will have 800 to 1,200 housing units, depending on demand. At the less expensive end, a 1,300-square-foot house will cost \$128,000 and the top home will be about \$350,000.



“The energy will be contagious throughout the development and will revitalize the area.”

Patrice McGinn
Torti Gallas

In total, the project is expected to be worth \$300 million when fully built by the middle of the next decade. Construction should begin this year.

The land for Smiley Heights is owned by nonprofits, including the Boy Scouts, Tulane University, and Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center. The late Paul Perkins donated the property to the nonprofits, which will share in the success of the development. The developers are working on the financing and expect to have it completed in coming months.



“If we don’t try it, it isn’t going to happen.”

Scott Bardwell
Bardwell Development





A CAROM SHOT

Bardwell says the neighborhood will get a boost from the rebounding Florida Boulevard corridor. Bon Carré, the Commercial Properties' remaking of Bon Marché Mall into an office park and technology incubator, is around the corner on Florida and Lodbell Avenue. Baton Rouge Community College is rising on Florida and Foster Drive. BREC is renovating the old Sears building into a new headquarters with plans to build a park near Smiley Heights. Capital Area Transit System is strongly considering its first rapid transit bus line along Florida, from Livingston Parish to downtown. Smiley Heights will add to the area by bringing a few thousand more residents—spurring even more retail and life in the area, says McGinn.

“The energy will be contagious throughout the development and will revitalize the area,” she says. •

STREETSCAPE

As envisioned by Torti Gallas, housing types and styles for Smiley Heights. The housing styles are based on existing Baton Rouge architecture.

THE DEVELOPERS

Commercial Properties Development Corp.

A for-profit real estate company that is the main asset of the Wilbur Marvin Foundation, which is under the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. The company, which is also renovating the Capitol House, put the Smiley Heights deal together.

Website: cpdcbr.com

Bardwell Development

Run by Scott Bardwell, the firm is the local liaison on the project.

Website: bardwelldevelopment.com

Torti Gallas

A Maryland-based design firm that provided the plan for Smiley Heights. Other projects include Baldwin Town Center in Orlando, and 5th and K Street revitalization in Washington, D.C.

Website: tortigallas.com

McCormack Baron Salazar

The developer of Smiley Heights specializes in rebuilding deteriorating urban areas. Projects include Centennial Place in Atlanta and Crawford Square in Pittsburgh.

Website: mccormackbaron.com